NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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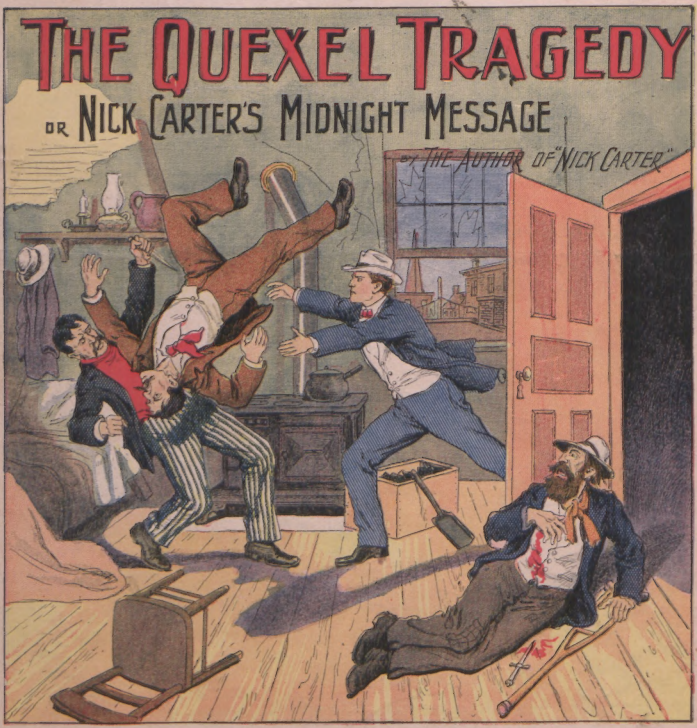
THE QUEXEL TRAGEDY

OR NICK CARTER'S MIDNIGHT MESSAGE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER."



With a quick turn, Nick Carter lifted his antagonist from his feet. Then with all his mighty strength he hurled him bodily through the air against the other assassin who was approaching them.

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THE QUEXEL TRAGEDY

OR,

NICK CARTER'S MIDNIGHT MESSAGE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MESSAGE AT MIDNIGHT.

It happened to be one of the few nights in the year when Nick Carter had retired to his bed early.

He was not asleep; he had not even extinguished the light in his room, for at the very moment of completing his preparations for retiring, he remembered that there was an article in one of the morning papers which he had promised himself that he would read sometime during the day. He had noticed the headlines, but at the very moment he was about to begin the perusal of what followed, he had been called away; so now he procured the paper from his study and then arranged himself comfortably in bed, to read it.

The "scare head" at the top of the column was:

ANOTHER QUEXEL TRAGEDY.

Under this were many subheads which related many of the prominent features contained in the article which followed, and the principal feature of them was that this was the seventh of a series of tragedies which had occurred in the Quexel family within a period of seventy years.

A strange and unaccountable coincidence—if coincidence it could be called—in connection with this series of fatalities, was that they had happened almost exactly ten years apart.

The article recited, at some length, the particulars of the first of the tragedies, which happened in the month of May, 1845; and then, one after another, it gave the histories of the succeeding tragedies in that ill-fated family, just as one had followed another, always ten years apart and always in the month of May.

But the most remarkable circumstance connected with the unaccountable succession of crimes in that particular

family, existed in the fact that not one of them had been explained.

Each was a mystery still.

Another equally inexplicable feature of the tragedies was that the victim, in each one of the ten cases, was a bride; a young and beautiful woman, just wedded to the man of her choice and cruelly struck down—murdered—before the honeymoon was ended.

In some of the cases these crimes had been committed within a few hours after the ceremony. In one case the tragedy had happened while the wedding guests were still assembled in the Quexel mansion; in another, the crime had been committed within a few minutes of the completion of the marriage ceremony, while the bride happened to be left alone for a moment.

There were three cases in which the deed was done within a few hours after the ceremony; two, in which some weeks had elapsed, and all of them had been consummated within a few months after the wedding—and each and all of them in the month of May.

All save this last one about which the detective was now reading.

This had happened on the first day of June.

It was the only innovation; but the account of the affair, as recited by the newspaper, explained this feature on the supposition that Quintus Quexel and his bride—now murdered—had purposely selected the first day after the month of May for the celebration of their nuptials, in the belief that in that manner they might succeed by violence in exorcising the specter of death which so relentlessly pursued the family.

This wedding had been celebrated at noon of the first day of June, at the old Quexel mansion overlooking the Hudson. At two in the afternoon, the bridal party had started for the city, accompanied by many of their guests, in the private yacht of Quintus Quexel.

They were a merry party on board that yacht, all the way to the city.

It was the plan, when the yacht arrived at the foot of West Twenty-third Street, that the guests should depart, leaving the bride and groom in sole possession of the magnificently appointed yacht—save for the crew, of course. Then the yacht was to sail away for the honeymoon trip, which was to extend through many months and was to include the "Land of the Midnight Sun" before it was completed.

Such was the plan.

The actual incidents were totally different.

The yacht arrived at Twenty-third Street in due time, and as soon as the lines were made fast to the wharf, the entire party assembled on the deck for the leave taking.

It is necessary to emphasize that word "entire"; for to the best of the recollection of every person concerned in the matter, there was not an absentee.

The entire party was on the deck. The yacht was moored close against the pier. A plank had been put out from the deck to the wharf to facilitate the passage ashore.

The ladies of the party were taking turns kissing the bride and wishing her all the happiness in the world; the men were grouped around Quintus Quexel, shaking hands, laughing, joking and altogether joyful.

It was a chatting, chattering, laughing, joyous group, and it was on the point of disintegrating when the bride remembered that there was just one short note which she wished to write and send ashore to be mailed.

Laughingly she disengaged herself from her admiring friends, and hurried below, calling back, as she disappeared into the saloon of the cabin, that she would not be a minute.

The laughter and the joking, the chattering and the jesting continued unabated after she left them.

After a little, however, they began to look for her return.

"Janice must be making her will," suggested one. "She is gone long enough."

"Oh, it wouldn't take her half so long to do that," laughed her husband. "She would leave everything she possesses, to me, in one sentence, you know."

More minutes elapsed, and then another of her young women friends—one of the bridesmaids, remarked:

"What do you suppose is keeping Janice?"

"Perhaps she is writing condolences to some of her discarded suitors," said one of the men, laughing.

Quintus Quexel turned to the bridesmaid who had spoken—a Miss Congdon—and said to her:

"Suppose you go after her, Minnie. Tell her that this is no time for writing letters."

"All right," replied Miss Congdon. "I'll fetch her back."

She darted away after her friend.

They saw her disappear into the cabin by the same door through which Janice Quexel had gone, fifteen minutes earlier.

Then—almost instantly thereafter, it seemed—there came to them from the cabin a long, piercing scream, terrible to hear, and filled with awful import.

In a body the party started toward the cabin, but not half a dozen steps had been taken, when Minnie Congdon staggered out upon the deck, and then with one last shuddering cry, she fell at their feet in a dead faint.

The men bounded past her, led by Quintus Quexel.

They crowded through the companion way close upon his heels, and they saw him throw himself frantically forward across the corpse of his bride, for Janice Quexel was lying at full length among the cushions of a Turkish divan in the cozy corner of the palatial saloon cabin.

She was lying there as if she had been sleeping when the death-dealing blow was struck, but that was, of

course, impossible, since she could not have been inside the cabin more than five minutes when she was killed; and so, even to the most inexperienced among the group which gathered around her, it was at once evident that the body had been placed there by the murderer after the foul deed was committed.

There was no expression of terror or fright upon her dead face; indeed, there was a smile on her lips, as if she had had no idea of the grim specter which hovered over her, when it appeared and ended her life.

At first, none of the spectators guessed the cause of death, but presently one of them, Donald Graeme, discovered the hilt of a curious weapon on the rug just under the edge of the library table which was fastened to the deck in the center of the saloon.

It was curious, chiefly because it was made entirely of glass, handle, crossbar and all.

"I have heard of weapons of this sort," he said in an aside to one of the men. "It is a kind of glass stiletto which the person who makes use of it can break off short in the wound by a single twist of the wrist. The remainder of the weapon remains in the wound, which, because of it, does not bleed. In some cases, I have heard that the skin will partly close over the wound so that it is difficult to find it."

Such, in effect, was the account of the crime which Nick Carter read from the paper while he was stretched on his couch in his bathrobe, having prepared himself for bed.

It was followed, of course, by interviews with various members of the party who were present at the time, and these interviews were followed in turn by a more or less succinct account of the other tragedies in the family already referred to.

This one resembled the other in many things.

It was the bride of a Quexel who was killed.

She had been stabbed through the heart, as each of the others had been, by a stiletto made of glass.

There was no apparent cause or reason for the crime.

There was absolutely no clew to the assassin. He had come and gone as silently as a spirit.

Every member of that party of guests was on deck at the time of the murder, Quintus Quexel himself among them. And this last point was emphasized, because in two of the ten tragedies enacted in the family, the groom had been charged with the crime, although afterward acquitted.

Every member of the crew of the magnificent yacht, from the captain to the stokers, was accounted for, and there was not even the possibility of casting the shadow of a suspicion upon any of them.

There was no suggestion anywhere that any person had attempted to come aboard secretly, nor had such a one been seen to attempt to leave it surreptitiously.

There was nowhere any trace or clew suggesting that a stranger had been aboard the yacht or of one who had attempted to board it at any time within a week.

The reason, or motive, for the commission of the crime was a total mystery, as was also the method by which the assassin had approached his victim, and his manner of escape after the deed was done.

Everything connected with it was dark, and terrible, and unreal, almost beyond belief.

There was only the dead body of Janice Quexel, the fatal wound under her left arm, the hilt of the glass stiletto and the evident fact that the body had been lifted after death and placed among the pillows where it had been found, to tell that another person than the victim herself, had been in that saloon.

Indeed, but for this last-mentioned fact—and it was patent to many of them—the suggestion of suicide would have found credence in the minds of many of those present; and even as it was, there were a few of them who shook their heads and wondered if after all the death wound were not self-inflicted.

The detective put the paper aside and gave himself up to reflection.

"It is a most remarkable case," he mused. "I wonder if I will be called into it? It is really ten cases in one, for there isn't a particle of doubt in my mind that everyone of these cases, covering a period of seventy years, are traceable to the same source—to the same incentive."

He raised his eyes to the clock and saw that it was exactly midnight; and then, as the chimes within it began to sound the hour, his telephone bell rang.

He left the couch instantly, hurrying to the phone; and, as he went, he murmured to himself:

"Dollars to doughnuts, that call is about the Quexel tragedy."

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS QUEXEL NEMESIS.

"Hello!" called the detective as soon as he had placed the receiver at his ear.

"Is that you, Nick?" came the answering question.

"Yes."

"This is Byrnes."

"I know it. I recognized your voice, chief."

"Can you come over to my house, Nick?"

"Now, do you mean?"

"Yes. Right away."

"Why, certainly, if it is important."

"I think it is. You haven't gone to bed, have you?"

"No; but I am almost there. What's up?"

"Haven't you seen the extras, out to-night?"

"You refer to the Quexel affair, I suppose."

"Yes."

"I have just been reading about it."

"Well, that is what I wish to see you about."

"All right. I'll get into my clothes and be there directly.

"Say, Nick."

"Yes."

"Quintus Quexel is here, now."

"There, with you, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Will he remain until I get there?"

"Sure."

"I won't lose a minute."

"I don't suppose you know much about the other tragedies in the family, do you, Nick?"

"No. I was in Europe on those diamond smuggling cases when the last one happened, ten years ago, and the one before that was rather ahead of my time. There are some notes of my father's about them, somewhere, however, I think."

"Yes. That is so. But you need not stop to look them up now."

"I'll be right around."

The detective lost no time in donning his clothing, and afterward he hurried with all speed to Fifty-eighth Street, where the home of the ex-chief, the great Thomas Byrnes, is located.

The chief admitted Nick in person, and led the way at once to a small private room at the rear of the hall.

"Quexel is in the library," he said, in a low tone, "and we will leave him there for a few moments. I want a word with you before I introduce you to him. Do you know the man at all, Nick?"

"No; I don't remember that I ever saw him."

"He's a fine fellow, Nick. I want you to start in with that assurance from me."

"All right. I've got it."

"I know him like a book. I knew his father before him, and his grandfather, too. It was the bride of his grandfather's oldest son—a brother of his father's—who was the first victim of this series of tragedies; that was in 1845. He survived the death of his wife only a few months."

"Who came next?" asked the detective.

"The bride of another son—the next in point of age and the next elder than Quintus' father. He lived two or three years after the death of his first wife, and then married secretly again; but, although the marriage was secret, the murderer found it out, and the month of May, three months after the wedding, the second bride of this one was killed."

"That makes three," said Nick.

"The second tragedy killed Quintus' uncle. He died of a broken heart in less than a year from that time."

"Who was the husband of the fourth victim of the strange nemesis?"

"Another brother, this time the one next younger than Quintus' father. He was married away from home, in 1875. He was in California. His bride was stabbed to death in a sleeping car, two hours after the wedding. He was arrested and tried for the crime, but was acquitted."

"Quintus' father seems to have met with better luck."

"Yes; he was married in '77, and until after the birth of Quintus, which happened a year later, he never permitted his wife to be a moment out of his presence. He gave up every inducement in order to remain at her side, and he believed up to the day of his death, a year ago, that to that fact he owed her life."

"So Quintus is now about twenty-seven years old."

"Yes; exactly."

"Well, that accounts for four of the tragedies in the family. There are five others, without counting this last one, which happened to-day. What about the others?"

"Quintus Quexel's grandfather had nine sons, two were older and six were younger than the father of Quintus. One of them, as I have already explained, lost two brides in this awful manner; the other tragedies were stretched along over the intervening period, at intervals of ten years.

"The first tragedy in the family occurred in 1845, and they have followed one another regularly ever since. The account in the paper is substantially correct."

"So the father of Quintus was the only one of the sons who succeeded in raising a family."

"Yes."

"And that would suggest that the murders have been committed systematically, from first to last, for the especial purpose of obliterating the Quexel family from the face of the earth."

"There is no doubt of that in my mind, Nick."

"Nor in mine. It is evidently the continuance of some sort of vendetta which began in the forties."

"That has always been my opinion."

"Are there brothers and sisters in Quintus' family?"

"He has one sister who is now traveling in Europe. She is twenty years old."

"What is her name, chief?"

"Natalie. She is a very beautiful girl. In fact, the family has always been remarkable for good looks on the masculine as well as the feminine side of it."

"There were no other children of Quintus Quexel's father and mother?"

"No."

"Is his mother living?"

"Yes. She is at the home on the Hudson."

"Do you think that this girl, who was killed this afternoon, the bride of Quintus, was aware of the fatality which pursues brides in that family, chief?"

"Yes. She was told about it; but it was the general belief that for some reason this immediate branch of the family—the father of Quintus and his descendants—were exempt from the general curse. At all events, Janice

Glenn married Quintus, knowing all about the danger—only she did not believe in it at all."

"I think my father had something to do with one of these cases, did he not?" asked Nick.

"Yes. The one of twenty years ago."

"I will look up his notes about it when I get home."

"I was also interested in that case," said the chief. "In fact, your father and I did some work on it together, but we never accomplished anything. There was absolutely not a clew or a sign of a clew to work upon. There was no apparent motive—there was nothing."

"What about the one of ten years ago?"

"It is in the same category. What I would suggest, Nick, is this."

"Yes."

"Let us go into the library now and you can have your talk with Quintus, for I know you will wish to ask him a great many questions which will be suggested by the conversation."

"Sure."

"After that, you and I will get together and go over as much of the past history of the family as we care to."

"That's a good idea."

"Quintus came directly to me to take this case for him, and he offers to give an independent fortune to the man who will raise this curse from his family. Now, as soon as I knew that there was another tragedy in the Quexel family, I determined at once to call you into the case, and to put the entire management of it in your hands. I am not so young as I was once upon a time, and, besides, I have fretted so much over the affairs of the Quexels in the past that I think I am in a better condition to be led than to lead in this particular matter; so you see, Nick, I'll just be consulting detective in this affair, and it shall be your case."

"Let us say, chief, that it will be our case. There won't be any question of leadership. We will just work the thing out together."

"All right, Nick. Now, let's go to Quintus."

CHAPTER III.

THE CURSE OF THE QUEXELS.

Inspector Byrnes spoke truly when he told Nick Carter that the Quexel family was famed for its handsome men and beautiful women, and a person might well have been excused for believing that the composite inheritance in this respect had descended to Quintus Quexel.

He was tall and he was handsome; and there was strength as well as beauty in his clearly cut, regular features, in the poise of his well-shaped head, in the expression of his frank and kindly eyes.

Well built, well formed, graceful and refined, the word patrician was written in every motion he made as well as in every phase of his character.

Byrnes had called him a fine fellow, and such praise from Inspector Byrnes was never given idly or without good and sufficient reason.

The expression meant a great deal, coming from him, too, for he intended it to convey honesty, integrity of purpose, truthfulness, strength of muscle as well as morals, and personal fearlessness.

When the detective was presented to him, Nick studied him in that quick and comprehensive way of his which omitted no detail that was worth noting, and he saw just such a man as has been already described.

His hair was dark, but not black. His eyes were deep gray-brown; eyes that are usually described by the word hazel.

Just now he was frightfully pale, and Nick could see that it was only with the exercise of almost superhuman effort that he remained calm while he talked with the two men.

Think of it a moment.

He had been married to the young woman whom he loved more than life itself, at noon time of that very day, and now, approximately twelve hours later, he was in consultation with the two greatest detectives in the world, concerning her death—her murder.

Is it any wonder that he was pale and almost distracted? Is it not a wonder, rather, that he had the courage and the strength to undertake that interview at all?

"The inspector and I have already consulted somewhat about the sad errand which has brought you here, Mr. Quexel," said Nick. "I suppose he told you before he sent for me, of his wish to call me into the case."

"Yes, Mr. Carter," replied Quintus, "the chief has already assured me that if there is a man alive who can free our family of this dreadful curse, you are that man."

"I certainly have hopes, Mr. Quexel, that by working together, the chief and I may look forward to some degree of success," said Nick. "And now, before we begin to touch upon the affair of the present moment, I would like to ask you some questions about the past."

"Very well, sir. I will promise to reply to them to the best of my ability."

"I understand that your father died about a year ago," said the detective.

"Yes; fourteen months, to be exact."

"Did you ever discuss the matter of this curse, with your father?"

"Often, sir."

"Do you know if he had any definite opinion about it?"

"I know that it was as great a mystery to him as it is now to me—or to you."

"He was the third son of your grandfather, was he not?"

"Yes."

"Do you know if he had ever discussed it with his father?"

"His father always refused to discuss it with any of his sons."

"Are you quite positive about that?"

"My father told me so, in so many words, more than once."

"How long has your grandfather been dead?"

"Since 1865."

"How old a man was he at the time of his death?"

"He was born in 1800."

"Are any of your uncles living?"

"No, sir. I am the sole male representative of our family."

"You have a sister."

"Yes; Natalie."

"Do you know—that is, have you ever heard your father or any member of your family state whether this curse, as we will call it, is visited upon the daughters as well as upon the sons of the family?"

"It is not known, sir. The fiend who pursues us has never permitted that phase of it to arrive at a test."

"What is the opinion of your sister, Natalie, on the subject?"

"She believes that if she should marry she would be sacrificed—that she would be murdered herself. These crimes seem to be all against women; the men, for some reason, are exempt from personal violence."

"Mr. Quexel, have you no theory about the matter yourself? Have you no definite opinion of your own?"

"Yes, sir, I have. However, I cannot truthfully assert that it is my own, for it was my father's idea, before it became mine."

"Tell me what it is."

"My grandfather was in the Mexican War. He went to the city of Mexico with Zachary Taylor, in the early forties. My father always believed that the feud, of which these crimes have been the aftermath, began there."

The two detectives exchanged glances, and Nick Carter remarked:

"I think that your father's idea may be the true one."

"We went quite deeply into that idea, Nick, ten years ago," said the inspector, "at the time that the young wife of Quinby Quexel was killed; and, also, twenty years ago, at the time Quarles Quexel's bride met with the same fate. We could discover nothing."

"May I ask," said Nick, turning again to Quintus, "if the given names of all your uncles began with the letter Q?"

"Yes, sir. All save the firstborn—my father's eldest brother. His name was Aaron."

"Do you know if there was any significance attached to this peculiarity? Or, was it a mere whim on the part of your grandfather?"

"I do not know, sir. My father did not know. With the one exception of the eldest son of my grandfather, every one of my uncles bore a name beginning with the letter Q, and not one of them possessed a middle name—nor do I. My father's name was Quentin. He used to saw that his was one family where mere initials meant nothing, because they were all Q Q's."

"What was your grandfather's given name?"

"Aaron; the eldest son was named for him."

"What the devil are you driving at Nick?" asked the chief.

"Nomenclature, chief. There may be something in it, too. We know at least that the old man did not get the q-urious idea about names until his return from the Mexican War. Now, Mr. Quexel, we will get down to the present trouble, if you will discuss it with me for a moment."

"I will try to do so, Mr. Carter."

"Your wife was, of course, aware of this curse which has pursued your family for so many years?"

"I talked with her about it many times. I explained it to her fully, before I asked her to marry me."

"How did she regard it? As a joke? Or, did she take it seriously?"

"She viewed it quite seriously, when she discovered how much in earnest I was about it."

"The chief, here, tells me that you had come to believe that your particular branch of the family was exempt."

"It was my father's idea, and I will confess that I thought so, too."

"Your mother was never attacked during the early months of her married life, was she?"

"Never, sir."

"Her life was never threatened?"

"Never, sir."

"Have you asked her the question, so that you speak now from knowledge, or do you mean merely that you have never heard of such an occasion?"

"I have questioned her. I did so before I asked Janice to be my wife."

"Who built the mansion which you call home now? which you inherited from your father?"

"My great-grandfather built the old house, much of which is standing yet. It was greatly enlarged by my grandfather, in his time, and my father also added to it. There is no resemblance left now, to the original building, although that is a part of the present edifice."

"Were any of these crimes committed inside that house?"

"No; not one."

"Did you, at any time before your marriage, receive any warning of any kind, or any suggestion from any quarter, that the curse of your house might descend upon you?"

"None whatever."

"No intimation of any kind was given you, of what might happen in the event of your marrying?"

"None."

"You were married in your own home instead of in the home of the parents of the bride, were you not?"

"Yes. Janice was an only daughter. Her father and mother reside in an apartment house here in the city. There was better opportunity for a wedding in our great house."

"Where is your yacht now, Mr. Quexel?"

"At anchor, off Twenty-fifth Street, in the North River. Janice's father and mother are aboard——"

"Excuse me a moment, Quintus," interposed Chief Byrnes, who then turned to Nick, and added: "Mr. Quexel telephoned for me as soon as he could do so after this sad event happened, and I have used what little influence I still possess to render the red tape proceedings which always accompany such an affair as little irksome as possible. Officialdom has completed its necessary interferences, and the yacht is only awaiting the return of Quintus to proceed at once to his home. The family mausoleum is on consecrated ground on their estate."

"Thank you," replied Nick. Then, to Quexel:

"It was one of the bridesmaids who discovered that a crime had been committed, was it not?"

"Yes."

"The newspaper account that I read stated that you had no difficulty in accounting for every guest, every member of the yacht's crew, and, in fact, every person who was aboard at the time, so that there could be no possibility of suspecting any one of them, even in the extreme case that any person on board the yacht at the time might have merited suspicion."

"That is absolutely true, sir."

"Will you tell me how you know it to be true?"

"There were very few guests with us aboard the yacht. We had asked only a few of our nearest and dearest friends to accompany us as far as New York. The papers stated that we brought to New York with us the wedding guests that resided there, but that was not so. Nearly all of them returned as they went, by train. There were only eight guests, besides the father and mother of my wife, aboard the yacht."

"And they were all on the deck with you at the time your wife went to the cabin to write the letter?"

"Every one of them?"

"What about the crew?"

"The crew was forward, to a man."

"The stewards, the servants, your wife's maids—in fact, all the other people who made up the complement of the vessel—where were they?"

"They, too, were on deck, forward, or amidships. There was absolutely no person belonging to the vessel, in the saloon, or in any part of the yacht where they could get to the saloon without passing along the deck past where I was standing."

"You regard the theory of suicide as absolutely untenable, of course."

"More than that, it is preposterous."

"I quite agree with you."

"There must have been a man concealed inside the cabin, awaiting his opportunity, sir; but even so, it is inexplicable how he could have escaped."

CHAPTER IV.

PREPARING TO LAY THE GHOST.

The detective referred again to the newspaper article.

"It was stated," he said, "that after the crime was committed the assassin must have raised the body from the floor, or from the chair in which she was seated when the blow was struck, and carried it some distance to the divan in the cozy corner of the saloon."

"Yes; that is true. It was evident to all."

"Your wife went below to write a letter, did she not?"

"Yes."

"Had she written any part of it?"

"Just so much as the date, and the superscription, which began, 'Dear Alice.' That is all that she had time to write, evidently."

"Where were the writing materials?"

"On the library table, which is made fast to the deck in the middle of the saloon cabin."

"She was doubtless seated in the chair, there, when she was struck?"

"Without any sort of doubt at all."

"What is the distance from that spot to the divan where she was found?"

"Approximately twenty feet."

"You did not discover any evidence of anything approaching a struggle?"

"Nothing. I do not believe that Janice knew herself to be in danger. I don't think she suspected the presence of any person there at all; and she must have died instantly. The expression of her features supports that idea."

"Do you know how much your wife weighed?"

"One hundred and forty-nine pounds."

"So it required a moderately strong man to carry her to the divan."

"Yes."

"And an extraordinarily cool one, too, since he dared to do such a thing under such circumstances."

"Yes."

"Have you any personal enemies who could conceive and execute such a crime as this?"

"No, sir; I think not."

"Had your wife any such?"

"I have never heard that she had an enemy in the world, Mr. Carter?"

"Were there any disappointed suitors for her hand?"

"No; there were no suitors, for the reason that I have been the accepted claimant for her hand since we were children. She has never loved anyone but me, and I never loved anyone but Janice."

He broke down for a moment, then, in spite of his strong reserve force; but after a little he raised his head again, and said:

"Proceed, Mr. Carter."

"I hope you understand, Mr. Quexel, how deeply I sympathize with you and how much I hesitate to probe into your recent wound," said Nick, kindly, "but you must understand that we cannot extract a bullet without probing for it, and——"

"I quite understand you, sir, and I thank you. I wish to assist you all I can, and I will not permit my personal feelings to stand for one instant in the way of your success."

"You remarked, a moment ago, that not one of the crew, who were forward and amidships on the deck, could have reached the saloon cabin without passing where you were standing. Now, if that is so, will you tell me how it would have been possible for any person, who was already inside the saloon cabin, to have escaped from it without being seen by one of your party?"

"I regard it as quite impossible."

"Then how do you account for the escape? For escape there must have been."

"I can only account for it in one way."

"And how is that?"

"When Minnie Congdon went to the cabin in search of Janice, and discovered what had happened, she ran back to the deck, screaming."

"Yes."

"Everybody there was frightened. We all rushed pellmell toward the cabin. We fairly tumbled over one another, I think. I was in advance by the time we reached the cabin door. You see, I thought I knew what had happened the instant I heard Minnie's scream. When I entered the cabin and saw Janice on the divan, I rushed to her, and, in the first paroxysm of grief, I threw myself almost across her body."

"Yes. I can understand that."

"I don't know what the others did in that first moment or two, but I do know that they were all greatly excited."

"Certainly."

"Well, sir, is it not likely that the murderer, foreseeing just such a condition of things, coolly awaited that very moment to make his escape? And would it not have been possible for him to do so unseen, at such a time?"

"It is possible."

"That is the only way by which I can account for it."

"Then you think that he must have concealed himself aboard the yacht many hours before your party went aboard."

"He must have done so in order to have been there at all."

"You think he might have gotten past your crew, unseen?"

"I know that he did get into the cabin and that no person admits having seen him."

"Was the yacht moored to a wharf, or was she anchored in the river, at the time she was awaiting your party, in front of your residence?"

"She was moored to the wharf."

"How long had she been lying there?"

"At the wharf only a few hours. Before that she had been anchored in the river."

"Do you know if any strangers were seen hanging about your place up the Hudson, during the last few days?"

"If any such person or persons have been seen, the fact was not reported to me."

"Have you asked your men on the yacht that question?"

"No; but I think I would have been told about it if such were the fact."

"Are the members of your crew under strict discipline, Mr. Quexel?"

"The crew is under naval discipline, sir. My captain is a retired lieutenant of the navy, and in some particulars he is almost a martinet. I have been obliged to remonstrate with him for being too strict, several times in the past."

"But you regard him as in every way trustworthy?"

"Absolutely so, sir. There is no man in the world for whom I feel a higher degree of respect than I do for him. He stands in the position of a friend as well as an employee."

"How about your first and second officers, and the petty officers?"

"They are, each and every one of them, entirely trustworthy in every particular—at least, I so regard them, and I am sure that I am right about it."

"What about the members of the crew itself?"

"There is not a man in the crew, from the stokehole and the galley to the cabin, who has not been with me three years. I pay them by the year. I know them all by name. I like them all, and I believe that every man of them is personally fond of me."

"You feel quite certain, then, that there is not one among them who would accept a bribe to permit a stranger to conceal himself in the cabin, and then, frightened by the consequences of what he had done, hold his tongue afterward?"

"I am sure that there is no such man as you describe among the members of my crew."

"The railroad runs between the grounds, which sur-

round your home and the wharf where your yacht was moored, does it not?"

"Yes; but there is a point of land which juts out into the river just there, which contains about three acres of ground. That also belongs to me. It makes quite a walk to the wharf after you have crossed the railroad."

"A hundred yards or more, I suppose?"

"Two or three hundred, I should say."

"How do you cross the track from your grounds to the point where the wharf is located?"

"By an overhead bridge which the railroad company permitted me to build there. It is forty feet above the tracks. We descend on the other side by a long flight of steps with wide landings after each fifth step."

"The yacht is waiting for your return now, so the chief says."

"Yes, sir. Off Twenty-fifth Street."

"I should like to accompany you there now, Mr. Quexel, and I am sure that the chief would like to go with us, if you think our presence will not be an intrusion."

"I shall be glad to have you go with me, gentlemen; both of you. The chief is an old friend, and as for you, Mr. Carter, you have already made yourself my friend. Shall we start at once?"

"Yes; and as soon as we are aboard you may tell the captain to get under weigh. We will accompany you to Cedarmere, but we will return by train in the morning."

It was something after half-past one o'clock in the morning when the party of three arrived at the yacht, which at once started on its sad return trip up the Hudson.

Inside the cabin only one light glimmered, and there, in the stillness of the night, the bereaved father kept silent vigil over the body of his only child.

"Do you wish to enter the saloon cabin to-night, Mr. Carter?" asked Quexel, as soon as the yacht was well out upon the river.

"No," replied the detective. "There will be plenty of time for that after we are moored to the wharf at Cedarmere. Besides, it is your home rather than the yacht which I wish to inspect."

"My home?"

"Yes, Mr. Quexel. I am convinced that the key to all these mysterious crimes is hidden away somewhere in the history of your grandfather, and there must be many things which speak of him, in that old mansion where he once lived."

"That is," replied Quexel. "In fact, sir, the rooms in the old wing, which he occupied as his private apartments to the day of his death, remain in precisely the condition they were in then. It was one of his last requests, my father told me, that after his death his rooms should be sealed and should remain so as long as one stone of the house remained upon another."

"So," said the detective, musingly, "the old man found a way to guard his secrets, even after his death, did he not?"

"It would seem so; although I have never thought of it in just that light."

"Why else should he have made such a request?"

"Why, indeed?"

"You will have no objection to my entering those rooms?"

"None whatever, sir. Do whatever you believe to be for the best. I shall put no obstacle in your way."

"Your grandfather died in 1865, I believe you said?"

"Yes."

"And have his rooms never been entered since that time?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Forty years. That is a long time to leave rooms sealed up, Mr. Quexel."

"They are in an old wing of the house, and on the second floor. They are away from the general rooms of the house, and we never have occasion to go near them at all."

"I understand. Did it never occur to you to search in those rooms for the secret which has wrought such disaster in your family?"

"No; the secret has not weighed with me, particularly. I have known the history of the crimes, of course, but almost as a stranger might have known them. I was seventeen when the last one occurred, and it did not come very near to me, for I scarcely knew the uncle whose wife was killed. I was in college, and thought very little about it. The one before that I do not remember at all. I think I have believed, all along, that the curse would not descend to the third generation."

"I think," said Nick, slowly, "that this is the sort of curse which might descend through a dozen generations, unless drastic means are used to stop it."

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERY IN THE STOKEHOLE.

Nick Carter and Chief Byrnes remained aboard the yacht, after its arrival at Cedarmere, until after the body of the murdered bride was taken to the mansion, and Nick employed the time, as soon as they had gone, in making an inspection of the yacht, and in discussing the sad event with different members of the crew.

But neither his search nor his talks with the crew developed anything of importance.

The interior of the saloon cabin was much like that of any other yacht.

There were the usual entrances and egresses to and from it, and, save that the interior of the vessel was rather more magnificent than are most private yachts, she was much the same as others in plan and equipment.

He quickly demonstrated to his own satisfaction that once an intruder gained a foothold aboard the craft, there would be little or no difficulty in traversing the entire length and breadth of the yacht without discovery; the point where the real difficulty did exist, was in boarding or leaving the vessel without being observed.

The detective found Capt. Pearson to be a man of great intelligence and that apparently he was entirely devoted to his young employer; and soon after daylight, Nick, with Byrnes and the captain, seated themselves near the taffrail.

"Captain," said Nick, abruptly, "I wish you would assist the chief and me, all you can, in this inquiry."

"Indeed, Mr. Carter, it is my earnest desire to do so," was the reply.

"Then, will you tell me exactly what you think about it, regardless of whether your ideas and thoughts are logical or not?"

"I am so puzzled, sir, that I scarcely have an idea on the subject."

"But the yacht is under your command."

"Yes."

"And a stranger has managed to get aboard of her, commit murder and escape, without your knowledge."

"Alas! sir—yes."

"Have you considered how that might have been accomplished?"

"I have considered it and thought about it until it has driven me almost out of my reason."

"And you have sought to explain it in a thousand ways, have you not?"

"Indeed I have."

"Give me a few of those chimerical explanations you have made to yourself."

"I can't, sir. There is not one of them which is worthy of consideration."

"And yet the murderer was here."

"Yes."

"Could the murderer be found among the members of your crew?"

"God forbid!"

"That remark does not answer my question."

"How else can I reply to it? I can only say that I do not think so."

"But the thought has occurred to you, has it not?"

"I must confess that it has."

"Let us suppose that we were almost positive that one of the crew is the guilty man; upon which one of the crew would suspicion first be directed?"

"That I cannot answer, sir."

"And yet I can see by the expression of your lips as you just now closed them tightly together, that you could answer it if you would."

"No; you are wrong. If there happens to be one or two of the men for whom, or against whom, I have a feeling of personal repugnance, that is no reason why I should cast such a horrible suspicion as this one upon them."

"Certainly not; but intuitive perceptions are often quite reliable."

"Nevertheless——"

"And the mere fact of your disliking them, or even if you directed suspicion against them or either of them in so many words, it would not prejudice me in the least."

"Still, Mr. Carter, I do not think that I would, at this point in the case, be justified in mentioning even my personal dislikes concerning the crew. I would rather remain silent and do a little detective work on my own account."

"As you please. I will ask you, however, to bring me your shipping book."

"My——".

"You are a sailor, sir. When you engage a man to serve in your crew, you compel him to sign articles, do you not?"

"Certainly."

"Isn't that book called a shipping book?"

"I call it a register."

"Very well, bring me your register."

"I don't know that I have any right, sir, to——"

"Capt. Pearson," said the chief, "you will be good enough to bring the register at once. This is no time for standing on ceremony. I represent Mr. Quexel, and I have full authority to give orders in his name."

"Very well, sir."

The captain disappeared inside the cabin and presently returned with the book in his hands.

"There it is, gentlemen," he said, and he was about turning away when Nick called to him:

"I will ask you to remain with us, captain, while I look over the names," he said. "It is quite likely that I shall wish to ask you some questions."

Capt. Pearson seated himself, gnawing his mustache savagely, but he made no reply.

Nick opened the book almost at random, but presently became absorbed in studying it, turning the leaves slowly, first one way and then another. Presently he asked the captain:

"How long have you been in the employ of the Quexel family?"

"Nine years, sir."

"You were engaged, then, originally, by Quentin Quexel, the father of Quintus?"

"Yes."

"Was this yacht in commission then?"

"No; the *Valorous* is only three years old. The old yacht was called the *Dashaway*."

"Was she built for the father or the son?"

"Quintus built her. His father had given him the

Dashaway, which he sold and then had the *Valorous* built."

"Did you engage the crew when this yacht was placed in commission?"

"I did."

"Is the personnel of the crew the same now as it was then?"

The captain stirred uneasily. There followed a scarcely perceptible moment of hesitation, and then he replied, apparently with reluctance:

"No; there have been three changes since then."

"Tell me about those changes, if you please. When they were made, and why?"

"I do not see, sir——"

"Captain, it does not make a particle of difference whether you see or not, you are to reply to my questions as I ask them."

"Very well, sir. What do you wish to know?"

"When was the first change made in the personnel of the crew?"

"During the first summer she was in commission."

"And the second?"

"That same season."

"And the third?"

"Three weeks ago."

"Exactly. I see by your book that a change has been made rather recently. Now, let us go back to the first one. Why was that one made?"

"Because I had an opportunity to secure a better man than the one I had. The same answer applies to the second, and the——"

"Not so fast, if you please, captain. I will come to the third in a moment. But before I do so I wish to know how it happens that Quintus Quexel believes that every man aboard this yacht has served him ever since the yacht was placed in commission three years ago?"

"Merely because I have not deemed it necessary to bother him with the details of the hiring and discharge of men."

"He informed me that he was acquainted with every man of the crew by name. How does it happen that he did not notice the first two changes?"

"He scarcely used the yacht that season at all. He was in Europe almost all the time, and when he did come aboard again he did not realize that a change had been made. He did not know the names of the men, then, as he does now."

"Quite likely. Now, this third man."

"Well?"

"He is a stoker. I see."

"Yes."

"And it is not at all likely that Mr. Quexel has seen him at all since he has been employed here; or, if he has seen him, the man has had his face so smeared with soot and grime from the stokehole that he would be unrecognizable at best."

"Very likely."

"Now, captain, will you tell me why, in each of the occasions when you have made changes in the personnel of your crew, you have given the new man the name of the old one, who was discharged, instead of permitting him to ship under his own name?"

"Merely because of that peculiarity of Mr. Quexel's which causes him to insist that he does not wish changes made."

"Captain, isn't that another way of saying that he has given you orders that you were to make no changes in the crew without first consulting him?"

"Yes; if you will have it so."

"So you have deliberately disobeyed his orders, have you not?"

"I cannot be captain unless I am captain, sir."

"You deliberately disobeyed orders, did you not?"

"I acted in the best interests of my employer. My responsibility——"

"Never mind your responsibility. You made one mistake in your little practice of deceit, captain; you should not have forced the men you engaged to sign this book."

"I do not require any instruction from you, sir, as to the proper manner of performing my duties," said the captain, haughtily.

"I think you do, captain; and you will get them whether you need them or not."

The captain started to his feet, flushed with anger.

"By Heaven, sir!" he exclaimed. "I won't stand——"

"Sit down, Capt. Pearson," said the detective, sternly. "I do not now believe that you are in any way implicated in this murder, but I warn you, if you attempt the high and mighty with me, I'll clap the irons on you and take you to jail so quickly it will make your head swim."

The captain sank back, pale and trembling.

"For God's sake, sir"—he began, but the detective restrained him with a gesture.

"The name under which you chose to ship this new stoker was the same as his predecesor bore, was it not? Joe Burleigh, is the name."

"Yes."

"What is the man's real name?"

"I don't remember."

"It was a foreign name, was it not? The handwriting is certainly foreign. It is rather excellent handwriting, too, for one who accepts a position as stoker. And did you notice the fact that when he signed the name he inadvertently began to write his own instead of the one with which you supplied him? He made a F, here, and then rubbed it out with his dirty finger."

The captain made no reply, and, for a moment, Nick Carter was silent. Then he said:

"Captain, I think if you will investigate the matter at

once, you will discover that your faked Joe Burleigh has deserted, since the murder. Or, did you already know that?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DETECTIVE'S FIRST CLEW.

Capt. Pearson had turned a shade paler than before, if that were possible, while the detective was speaking, but now he reassumed his accustomed appearance of haughty composure, while he replied with an ironical smile:

"As astute as you are, Mr. Carter, you are mistaken in this instance. The man called Joe Burleigh is at this moment asleep in his bunk. He stoked for us during the trip here this morning."

"Are you quite sure of that?"

"I am positive of it."

"Very well. I will ask you to remain here with the chief for a moment. Chief, will you keep the captain entertained until my return?" and the detective cast a meaning glance toward the old detective."

"Yes," replied Byrnes, smiling.

Nick left his chair abruptly and started away, and the captain started from his, and would have followed, had not the detective turned and said, slowly:

"Be good enough, captain, to remain with the chief until my return. If I have need of you I will call you."

"I am captain of the yacht, sir," replied the officer, haughtily.

"Very well," said the detective, while the ghost of a smile played upon his features, "in that case you may call me the admiral; and, unless you wish to witness the spectacle of the captain in irons, you will obey me."

"You had best sit down," said the inspector, coldly; and the captain did so.

In the meantime, Nick hastened forward where several of the men were seated around the fo'castle hatch.

"Where is the stoker called Joe Burleigh?" he asked, generally of the men.

"Turn in," replied one of them.

"Rout him out, one of you, and send him up. He's wanted."

The sailor who had replied to Nick's question dived below, and, after a lapse of a few minutes, returned accompanied by a ruddy-faced Irishman, who was rubbing his eyes sleepily and yawning prodigiously.

"Are you Joe Burleigh?" asked Nick, as soon as the man appeared.

"I am, sir. At least, that's the handle they made fast to me when I shipped," was the reply.

"Come forward in the chains with me for a moment, Burleigh. I want to talk with you."

"Ay, ay, sir."

[illegible] the way into the [illegible]

until they were out of hearing of the men at the fo'castle hatch.

"Now, my man, what is your real name?" he demanded.

"Mike Callahan, sir."

"Why did you not sign articles under your own name?"

"Faith, your honor, I didn't sign articles at all, at all."

"I thought so. When did you come aboard the *Valorous?*"

"Yisterday, sir."

"What time yesterday?"

"In the morning, sir."

"Where did you join? Here?"

"I did, sir."

"Did you see the man whose place you took?"

"Is it the other Burleigh ye mane, sir?"

"Certainly."

"Well, sir, savin' your presence, he was no more of a Burleigh than I am."

"What was he?"

"A Dago, I'm thinkin'."

"Did you see him?"

"That I did, sir."

"Did you see him when he left the yacht to go ashore?"

"I did, sir; an' whin he came back to it, too."

"Ah! You saw him return?"

"Sure I did, sir."

"When?"

"Before he wint away at all, at all, sir. Sure, there was nobody on the deck at the time. I was down in the stokehole mesilf, sir, whin he come divin' down like a sail with a cut halyard, an' he says to me, says he, 'Stow me away, will ye? Sure I wants a passage back to York, so I do.' Well, sir, I had no objections to offer to that, an' so I towld him to stow himsilf away an' I'd forgit I'd seen him."

"What became of him after that?"

"Faith, I dunno, sir. I did not clap eyes on him since then."

"Do you know when he finally went ashore?"

"Sure, I do not."

"You say you think he was a foreigner; did he talk good English?"

"As good as you do, sir. Better than most min in the fo'castle."

"Would you know him if you should see him again, Mike?"

"Faith, I dunno. Mebby if he had the coal dust on him, I might; but if he was washed up, I dunno."

"Tell me how it happened that you joined the yacht here, at this place," said Nick.

"That's aisy, sir. I was in the town just above. I heard that the yacht was goin' fur a deep-wather cruise and so I came down here and asked for a job. I met [illegible] Burleigh. I [illegible] on the [illegible] an'

I axed him if there was a show. He said there was, as he was goin' to leave that very day. Well, sir, jist at that minute, along comes the old man—it's the captain I mane, now—an' the Dago, he says to the ole man, 'Will you take this man in my place, sir?' An' thin they had some talk about his leavin', and the ole man axed me some questions, and finally he said, says he, 'If you'll take this man's name, an' call yersilf Joe Burleigh, ye kin have the job.' 'All right,' says I, 'it's near enough to Irish, I'm thinkin',' and wid that I was engaged. That's how it happened, sir."

"Well, what happened next?"

"Sure the Dago brought me aboard an' showed me me bunk. I had no chist, an' so he gives me his'n, sayin' that he'd have no further use for it. Then he towld the men for'ard that he was lavin' an' that I was takin' his place; an' that ended it only for what I've already towld you, sir."

"Can you write your name, Mike?"

"Sure, I kin make a fist at it, sir, but I'm dommed if I could wrastle with that name Burleigh. How it's spelled I dunno, unless it's the aisy way, B-u-r-l-y, sir."

"Was nothing said about your signing articles?"

"Yis. The ole man said I could do that later."

"Are you a good, honest and faithful man, Mike?"

"Sure, sir, I thry to be. It's only whin I gets a bit too much of grog aboard that I'm a bit ugly. Mebby it's the Irish that does that; I dunno."

"Well, here's a dollar to pay for being roused from your sleep; and now, if anybody should ask you what we have been talking about up here in the chains, you are to wink your left eye and say that you have forgotten. Will you do that?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"One more word."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Has anything been said forward, about the murder of Mrs. Quexel?"

"Nottin', sir, only that most of the crew is for l'aving the yacht."

"Have they any suspicions about who committed the crime?"

"They all believe it was a ghost, sir. They have heard something about a curse which follows the owner's family, and they are scairt of it, sir; an' by the same token, I ain't jist aisy in me moind mesilf."

"Nobody in the fo'castle suspects the Dago, then?"

"Sure, I think I'm the only man as seen him, afther he slipped his cables and cast off."

"Do you suspect him, Mike?"

"Well, sir, I've thought of it; but I ain't said a word about it."

"All right; don't."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Do you think that the captain knew that the man remained aboard to ride to New York?"

"Sure, sir, I don't know a thing about it at all, at all."

"All right. You can turn in now, if you like. But remember that you are to keep silent about this talk of ours."

"I won't forgit, sir."

The detective left him then and went aft again, where he presently rejoined Chief Byrnes and the captain of the yacht.

Nick Carter dropped into his seat and lighted a cigar before he spoke. Then, very quietly, he remarked:

"I have been having a talk with your stoker, captain. The one who is called Burleigh."

The captain shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply.

"May I venture to ask, captain," continued the detective, "why you considered it necessary to attempt to deceive me about a matter so trivial?"

"Because it is none of your business," retorted the captain.

"On the contrary, it is very much my business, as you will presently discover—and to your cost, if you continue to adopt this tone with me. You have been playing double, somehow, and I propose to find out just what your purpose has been, even if I have to go to the extent of arresting you as an accessory to that murder; and I begin to think that you are not very far from being one."

"Before God, sir——"

"Hush!" said the detective, sternly. "Don't take any oaths until you are called upon to do so. Answer my questions, instead."

"Well, what are they?"

The captain was frightened now, and he showed it; but he managed to preserve an outward appearance of studied indifference.

"Do you know what became of the foreigner—stoker, after he resigned?"

"He went ashore."

"Do you know that to be a fact?"

"Yes."

"Don't you also know that he returned again, aboard the yacht?"

"No; I know that he did not."

"And that he rode on the yacht to New York, when you took the bridal party down?"

"I know that he did not."

"And that in fact he was aboard of the yacht at the time the murder was committed?"

"I know that he was not."

"Why do you pretend to be so positive?"

"Because I know whereof I speak."

"Tell me why you know, or think you know, captain."

"Because I was the last to come aboard the yacht after the bridal party arrived from the house. I was the last aboard before we cast off the lines, and one of the

last things I did was to hand that fellow his money. I saw him on the dock after we were in the river, and I know that he could not have gotten aboard after that."

Nick Carter left his chair and stood over the captain, menacingly.

"Capt. Pearson," he said, coldly, "you are lying to me, and you know you are."

With an oath the captain leaped to his feet, and instantly his fist shot out, so that if an ordinary man had been standing in Nick Carter's place he must have been struck.

But the detective parried the blow, and with the same motion seized the captain by his wrists.

Then, with apparently very little effort, he forced the ex-naval officer back into his seat and said, again:

"You lied to me Pearson, and you know it."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DETECTIVE SEES LIGHT AHEAD.

Ex-Chief Byrnes watched the scene that was just enacted with a quiet smile upon his handsome face which he strove in vain to conceal by stroking his heavy gray mustache continuously.

He understood perfectly well that Nick Carter did not really regard Capt. Pearson as directly connected with the crime.

As for the captain himself, he was perfectly white with rage.

He was not accustomed to being called a liar, although he realized that he had in a measure brought the charge of it down upon himself by resorting to deception in the first place.

He realized also that he was physically no match for the detective who had dared address such an epithet to him.

"Confess that you have lied to me," continued the detective, relentlessly.

With a visible effort, Pearson controlled himself, and, presently, in a voice which was husky with some sort of suppressed emotion, he said:

"I will admit that I have deceived you concerning an unimportant matter——"

"It is for me to judge whether the matter is important or not," interrupted Nick.

"I will admit that I have deceived you concerning a matter which I regarded as unimportant," repeated the captain, correcting himself, "but as concerns my having seen the stoker whose place the Irishman took, on the wharf after we had cast loose and were well out on the river, I have told you the exact truth."

"But Mike Callahan—which is the Irishman's real name—has just told me that the Dago, as he calls him, rushed into the stokehole just as the yacht was about to cast off and asked to be stowed away there."

"I don't care what Callahan, or anybody else, says, I tell you I saw the man on the dock when it was too late for him to have come aboard."

Nick saw that the captain was now telling the truth, or that he at least believed he was telling it, and he pondered a moment in silence.

Then, suddenly, he believed he saw a solution of the difficulty, but he did not propose to make it known just at that moment. Instead of doing so—and events later on proved that he was right in the conjecture he made at that moment—he determined to adopt a new tack in questioning the captain.

"The Irishman refers to the other stoker as a Dago," he said. "Can you explain why he does so? I have already discovered, from his handwriting in his book, that the man who wrote the name of Joe Burleigh here is a foreigner, and I am certain that he is not an Italian, for it is not Italian chirography. It is more French, or Spanish. Did you know the man to be a foreigner, captain?"

"Yes."

"What was he?"

"A Portuguese or a South American, I think."

"Do you know his real name?"

"I know the name he gave me when I first shipped him."

"What was that?"

"José Hernandez."

"That would be more Spanish than Portuguese, I think."

"Yes; I think he was at least of Spanish descent."

"He spoke English?"

"Perfectly."

"When you engaged him, did you not think that he was rather above his station? Rather above the sort of employment he sought?"

"He did not select the stokehole from choice."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that he applied to me for a job. He said he was a good sailor and capable of acting as an officer of the yacht, but that he had been long out of a job, had no money, was hungry and would accept anything I had to offer him. I offered him a place in the stokehole and he accepted it."

"That was three weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"What became of the man before him? The real Burleigh."

"He got a better job somewhere. I did not take the trouble to remember where, if he told me. I needed a man in the hold, and I took the first one who offered."

"Now, before we continue about the man, Hernandez, I want you to tell me the truth about the little deceptions you have practiced upon Mr. Quexel in relation to the names of the men in his employ."

"I have told you that already, sir. And I told you the truth."

"Tell me again, then."

"I was brought up in the navy, Mr. Carter. I served there twenty years. I am a disciplinarian; perhaps sometimes I am even too strict."

"I have no doubt of it."

"Mr. Quexel has peculiar ideas about running this yacht. He believes that it can be operated on the same principle and with the same sort of discipline he applies to his gardeners and his hostlers. He is also a very determined man. Now, you know—or you ought to know—that a yacht like this one cannot be kept in commission unless the captain of it is the captain. I could not stop to run to Mr. Quexel every time a member of the crew did wrong and had to be fired. I would have a smoldering mutiny on my hands in no time. The men would find out that I was only a figurehead and they would lose their respect for me and for my position as well."

"I can understand that, captain."

"Well, sir, I adopted this little deceit which you have discovered. Mr. Quexel never discovered the difference, and never would have known it."

"All that is very clear, captain. What is not clear is why you did not tell me all this at once and so spare yourself considerable humiliation, and me some trouble."

"I regarded it as none of your business, sir."

"Exactly; and you did not hesitate to tell me so, either. You knew why I was here, did you not?"

"Certainly."

"Well, under the circumstances, don't you consider that I have a perfect right to make everything that is connected with this yacht my business, if I see a reason to do so?"

"Yes."

"Now, we will return to the man, Hernandez, if you please."

"What! Again?"

"Yes, again. Had he washed up when you saw him last, while he stood on the dock after the yacht was cast loose?"

"No."

"Did you see any person around that dock yesterday who looked like a stoker, but who was not a member of your crew?"

"I did not."

"Do you remember the sort of looking chap Hernandez was when he first applied to you for a job?"

"Yes."

"He was very clean at that time, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"If you should happen to meet the man again, face to face, do you think you would know him?"

"I think I would."

"Did he act and look and talk like a hungry man the day you engaged him?"

"Yes; he did."

"Did you offer him anything to eat at the time?"

"I sent him to the galley and ordered the cook to give him all he could eat."

"Do you happen to know whether he took advantage of it or not?"

"Yes; I was told that he ate ravenously."

"Now, captain, I want you to send forward and have the man Callahan sent here to us."

"Why, pray?"

"You will find that out when he comes aft, sir. I wish you to understand that for the moment I am in command here, and that if you can find the strength to curb that confounded false pride of yours, and help me instead of hindering me, we may become very good friends instead of enemies. One would almost think that you were endeavoring to put every obstacle possible in my way, to prevent the discovery of the murderer of Mrs. Quexel."

"Mr. Carter, as true as there——"

"I know what you would say; but that does not change the aspect of things at all. You are merely an ex-naval officer whose life was spoiled because you did not get promotion, which you perhaps deserved, and whose disposition was ruined in consequence; and now if you will tuck some of that imitation pride in your pocket and save it until I have done with you, we will have no more trouble. Do me the favor to send for Callahan."

The captain flushed hotly, but he swallowed his anger and did as requested, and after a moment the stoker appeared.

"Mike," said the detective, "the captain has sent for you to have you sign articles. You told me that you could write your name, so let me see you do it. Here is the book."

"Faith, sir, is it me own name ye'd have, or is the name av the Dago?"

"It is your own name, Mike," replied Nick, smiling.

"Thin watch me."

He took the fountain pen which Nick handed to him, and wrote on the book, in large, uncertain, but plainly decipherable characters, the name "Mike Callahan, stoker."

"That is very well done, Mike," said the detective. "Now answer a few questions for me."

"Sure, I'll try, sir."

"You told me that the Dago came back and asked you to stow him away in the stokehole."

"True for you, sir."

"Are you sure it was the same man?"

"As sure as that you are the same gintleman who talked wid me at the foot av th' bowsprit a little while ago, sir."

"Now, look here——" began the captain, but Nick stopped him with a gesture.

"You talked with the man on the dock before you came aboard of the yacht at all, didn't you, Mike?"

"I did that."

"That was when the captain came along soon after and engaged you, wasn't it?"

"It was, sir."

"How long had you been talking with him before the captain joined you?"

"A matter of tin minutes, sir."

"Was the Dago alone when you first saw him?"

"No, sir. There was another stoker wid him."

"One of the men who is now aboard the yacht?"

"That I dunno, sir. I didn't have much of a look at him. He sort av slid in behind the little warehouse on the dock, whin I came up."

"Could you tell whether that man was also a Dago, as you call them, or not?"

"I couldn't, sir. The wan I know about came my way and I axed him about the job. I didn't pay any attention to the other man at all, at all, sir."

"And after you were down in the hole, the same man as you talked to came to you to stow him away, did he?"

"He did, sir."

"Would you be willing to swear on your oath that it was the same man?"

"I would, sir, on a stack av Bibles as high as a church."

"That will do, Mike. You can go forward; but say nothing to the crew."

"Narry a word, sir."

As soon as he was gone Nick turned to his companions.

"There," he said to them, "is the beginning of the solution of this mystery. I think that we can begin to see a little light; don't you, chief?"

"Yes, Nick, I do. Considerable light," was the quick reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAULING THE NET IN METAPHOR.

The captain left his chair and for a moment paced rapidly up and down the deck; but, presently, he turned and approached the two detectives.

"Gentlemen," he said, "and particularly you, Mr. Carter, I wish to apologize for my conduct toward you today. I have——"

"Say no more, captain," interrupted Nick. "We will forget it."

"Rather, let us say that we have already forgotten it," said the chief. "Sit down, captain, while we haul the net."

"While you do what?"

"Haul the net. We've got a lot of little fishes sailing around just out of sight, where the water is too deep for us to look them in the eyes, so we'll haul the net and make a closer inspection. Listen, and you'll catch on, all right, captain."

He turned to Nick Carter then, and added:

"Now, Nick, we know that there was a man aboard who did not belong here when that crime was committed, don't we?"

"Yes," replied Nick.

"And we are reasonably sure that it was the stoker, Hernandez, eh?"

"Reasonably sure, but by no means certain."

"No; for it might have been either of those two men."

"Yes; he might have been either of them; but it doesn't matter which one it was. It is a cinch that they were working together."

"And for the purpose of committing that murder."

"Precisely," said Nick.

"They must have looked enough alike so that the man left on the dock could have fooled the captain," mused the inspector, "for the captain says that he paid him his money just before the yacht cast off."

"Or," said Nick, "they might have looked enough alike for one of them to have deceived Callahan, which is the more likely proposition of the two."

"That is true."

"And, chief, if our theory regarding the existence of an old vendetta is correct, it is more than likely that the two men do resemble each other, for in that case they would be members of the same family."

"But will you tell me what their idea could have been in changing places?"

"I think," replied Nick, slowly, "that that part of it was the result of a sudden change in their plans. The appearance of Callahan on the scene suggested it at the last moment."

"Explain just how you mean, Nick."

"Very well. Let us go back, then, a little time."

"All right."

"Quintus Quexel's approaching marriage was announced several weeks ago."

"Yes."

"These avengers, as they doubtless call themselves, were already on the watch, we will say, for if they are what we suppose them to be, they have been constantly on the watch for some time."

"Admitted."

"With the announcement of the coming wedding, the time came for them to act. They had no difficulty in ascertaining that Quintus Quexel intended to use his yacht for the honeymoon, for the fact was published in the papers."

"Exactly."

"Very well, then, as soon as the announcement was

made, and the arrangements for the honeymoon trip were published, they laid their plans. We will say that they decided that one of them, who happened to be a good sailor, should apply for a position aboard the yacht, and that the other should hang around the house where the wedding was to take place. It was the sworn duty of both or of either one of them to whom the chance should come to murder the bride at the first opportunity after the ceremony was performed."

"That is my idea."

"If the opportunity came to the one on shore, and he succeeded, it merely remained for the fake stoker to serve in his menial capacity for a few days longer, and then to resign and take his leave with no suspicion attached to him. If, on the other hand, the man ashore should fail, the fake stoker would be in his place to do the deed later on."

"Now, let me talk a minute, Nick."

"Go ahead, chief. We already see the thing in exactly the same light."

"Isn't this your idea? That the two were having a last interview on the dock, in which the consummation of their plans was left to the stoker, when Callahan approached?"

"Yes."

"And that one of them—the one who had remained ashore—slid out of sight while the other went forward to see who Callahan was, for both realized that he had seen them together?"

"Yes."

"And that one, of course, was the stoker."

"Sure."

"And when he discovered that Callahan was in search of a job as stoker, the idea came to him suddenly that he would have a much better chance to escape after he had committed the deed, if he should resign on the spot, get the new man to take his place, and then, before any of the crew was aware that a change had been made, to smuggle himself aboard and conceal himself?"

"My idea exactly."

"It looks as simple as the nose on your face now, Nick. We will call the stoker No. 1 and his companion in crime No. 2."

"Yes."

"No. 1 saw his way quite clearly ahead of him the moment that Callahan applied for a job, and he went ahead and completed the arrangements without consulting his partner. While he was talking with Callahan, the captain approached, and then and there he informed the captain that the work was too hard for him, or words to that effect——"

"That is precisely what he said," remarked the captain.

"All right. You need interrupt only when I err, if you please. He informed the captain that the work was too hard for him, and that he had found a real stoker who would take his place; and if the captain didn't mind he would leave at once, as he had relatives, or a friend or a job, or something waiting for him not far away and he could walk there."

"That is wonderful, chief," exclaimed the captain, "for it is almost exactly the excuse he did make."

"A perfectly natural one under the circumstances. Doubtless, too, he said that he would make the new man a present of his chest, or sea bag, as there was not much in it, and if the captain would be kind enough to get his pay for him, he wouldn't even take the trouble to go aboard again."

"That is correct, too," said the captain.

"And now, witness what happened after that," continued the chief. "The captain went to his cabin to procure the money to pay this man off. As soon as the captain disappeared—and of course Callahan went aboard with the captain—No. 1 joined No. 2 again, and told him what he had done.

"It was all done in an instant, Nick. No. 2 caught on. He slipped aboard the yacht the instant that the captain disappeared into the cabin, while No. 1 calmly remained where he was, on the wharf, until the captain's return. No. 2 in the meantime had sneaked into the stokehole, asked Callahan to stow him away, while No. 1 was outside on the dock, receiving his pay from the captain, which he did not get, by the way, until the bridal party had come aboard. The captain says that he paid him the last thing before casting off. Now, Nick, is that the way you size the thing up?"

"Exactly; only I go still further."

"Go ahead. It's your turn."

"Well," said Nick, "there was still another reason why No. 1 and No. 2 should change places."

"Why?"

"No. 1 had been stoking for three weeks. He was covered with grime and dirt from head to feet. His clothing was saturated with it, as were his hands and face. On the other hand, No. 2 had merely assumed the outward appearance of a stoker, for the purpose of obtaining an interview with his confederate. The grime and dirt on his hands and face and clothing was merely smeared on and would easily wash from his flesh, while he could doubtless peel off his outer clothing and stand dressed like a gentleman."

"By Jove! Nick, you have struck it this time."

"Callahan says that when the man asked to be stowed away he told him to stow himself away, and that he'd forget that he'd seen him. That is all the man wanted. Callahan did not see him again after that, and so it is a safe proposition that he found some other place in the vessel than the stokehole in which to hide.

"The wedding party remained on the deck all the way down the river to New York. No. 2 practically had the run of the interior of the yacht. Doubtless he found an

opportunity to wash his face and hands, and discard his rough clothing. He had ample time to help himself to fresh linen from Quexel's supply, if he needed any. Everybody was on deck, you know, even the servants. It was a gala occasion, and discipline, even under Capt. Pearson, was forgotten."

"That is quite true, Mr. Carter," said the captain.

"Well, after No. 2 was fixed up, any of the stewards or servants—or, in short, any person save one of the regular party—would have mistaken him for one of the guests if he was seen at all.

"Now, gentlemen, it is not a difficult matter to observe things closely on board a yacht of this kind. No. 2 could easily have selected some point from which he could keep in view the members of the party assembled on the deck.

"It is an easy matter to fancy his watching them, while he awaited the very opportunity which came at last.

"The yacht had landed at Twenty-third Street. The party was grouped on the deck in the throes of leave-taking. We all know what a bridal party is like. Nobody thinks of anything serious at such a time.

"Then the bride remembered a letter she wished to send ashore. She went below to write it. She seated herself at that library table. She began to write. The assassin was there, somewhere behind her. It was an easy matter for him to approach her silently, to strike that murderous blow, to lift her to the couch after breaking off the weapon in the wound it had made, and then to beat a retreat through the waist of the vessel to the point where he had left his stoker's clothing.

"He had fifteen minutes in which to accomplish all this, before the alarm was given. It may have been twenty minutes—ample time in which to get back into the soiled garments—to make his way again into the stokehole.

"There were no stokers there now. They had gone on deck to get a breath of air, and to see the party, and to take a last look at New York for a time.

"There was ample time, even before the alarm, for him to do all this, to smear his face with coal dust, and to slip on deck himself.

"And when the alarm was given—when Miss Congdon discovered the body, what could have been easier than for him to step ashore and disappear during the first two or three minutes which followed that alarm?

"By the time it occurred to anybody to search for the presence of a stranger, he had vanished. There was only one person living who had knowledge that he had been aboard the vessel at all, and that was Callahan; and Callahan never dreamed of connecting him with the crime. There you have the whole story, I think, chief."

"Yes, sir, Nick, and it's the true one, too."

Then, with a quiet smile on his face, the chief turned to the captain and said:

"Captain, that is what we call 'hauling the net.' What do you think of it?"

"I think," replied the captain, dryly, "that you have yet to make your catch."

"We will find the bait for that in the old sealed-up wing of the Quexel mansion, unless I am greatly mistaken," said Nick Carter.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SEALED DOOR AND THE SHRINE OF BEAUTY.

It was half-past ten o'clock that morning when Nick Carter and Chief Byrnes, under the personal conduct of Quintus Quexel, approached the old wing of the mansion which had been kept sealed against all intruders for forty years, and it was with something akin to a sense of awe that the detective commenced the desecration of the somewhat ancient barriers.

They approached the wing through the mansion, and not from the outside.

Strangely enough, there was only one door which connected the wing with what was now the main building, and this had been closed by means of a heavy oak plank placed across the door and screwed fast to it and to the casing on either side of it.

As if this were insufficient, iron clamps had been in turn fastened across the plank at each end, and the heads of the screws which held this in place were covered with blotches of sealing wax.

"Who sealed this door?" asked Nick, as they passed in front of it.

"My father," replied Quexel. "He did it in the presence of his father."

"How was that?" asked the inspector.

"I have heard my father describe the occasion," continued Quexel. "The story about it is this: When my grandfather became convinced that he was dying he demanded that he be transferred to another part of the house before the end came, and that this door should be sealed in his presence.

"He possessed wonderful vitality, and he compelled his bearers to put down the cot on which they were carrying him, right here, so that he could witness the sealing of the door. Then he exacted the most rigorous promise from my father that the door should never be opened and that this wing of the house should never be visited.

"My father sealed the door in the presence of my grandfather; and he kept the promise he had made to him. He even went further, for he exacted a like promise of me, although I gave it conditionally."

"What was the condition?" asked Nick.

"I told him that as long as it seemed unnecessary that the door be opened, it should remain closed; that I would never open it for the mere purpose of discovering what was beyond it, but I reserved to myself the privilege of

entering the wing, if in my judgment such a proceeding should seem necessary.

"Now, gentlemen, the time has come when I do regard such a proceeding as necessary; and, Mr. Carter, I authorize you to open the door and to search the rooms that lie beyond it."

The detective had the necessary tools in his possession, and he was on the point of beginning with them, when Quexel spoke again.

"Here is a plan," he said, "which my father furnished me of the interior of this wing. You will observe that it shows four rooms. This one, which is the one you enter by this door that is before us, was the general living room of the wing. Every person in the house had free access to this room during my grandfather's life. This room here, to the right of it, is the library. My grandfather was accustomed to shutting himself in the wing as soon as darkness fell, and he usually passed his time until he retired in this library. He never permitted himself to be disturbed at such times, and refused to answer a summons at the door if anyone had the hardihood to knock upon it.

"This room here, to the left, was his sleeping apartment, and that beyond the bedroom, which, as you can see, could only be entered by passing through the bedroom, was a mystery, even to my father.

"He never passed the threshold of that door. Not one of his brothers had ever done so.

"You will find that it is locked, and that there is an iron bar across it which is also locked securely. My father never saw it unlocked. He doubted even if his father ever entered that room, and he believed that it was because of the contents of that room that the old man insisted upon the sealing up of the entire wing.

"Mr. Carter, and you, Chief Byrnes, I am convinced that you will find what you seek in that room, and I earnestly hope that you may succeed.

"I shall not go with you into the wing.

"I will await you in the library. If you need me—if you require my presence, I will come to you at once. You have only to indicate that you want me; but unless you do want me, I prefer that you should make the investigation without me."

"I was about to suggest that very thing," said the detective.

"Very good. Then I will leave you. I will go to the library and I will remain there until one or both of you return to me there. Shall I leave this plan with you, Mr. Carter?"

"No; keep it. It was made for you by your father, and I shall not need it."

The two detectives waited until Quintus Quexel had disappeared through the library door, and then Nick attacked the entrance to the wing.

He was not long in removing the sealing wax and the iron clamps, and without going into detail, only a very few moments elapsed after they were alone before they stepped into the mysterious precincts of the wing of the mansion and closed the door behind them.

It is not given to many people to enter a room or an apartment which has been closed against all people for a period of forty years, and the effect is indescribable.

Unless one has undergone such an experience, no idea of the sensation of it can be transmitted through the medium of mere written words.

There is something ghostly, mysterious, uncanny, repulsive, abhorrent and awesome about it.

There is the heavy, musty, indescribable odor of decaying upholstery. An impalpable dust rises into the face. It suggests the opening of a tomb, only that it is infinitely more appalling, for in the opening of a tomb one knows what will be found, but in a case of this kind there is nothing but mystery ahead.

The carpets, the rugs, the upholstery were reduced to shreds and dust. Articles of furniture had dried out and fallen to the floor in wrecks. A huge davenport had utterly collapsed. An old French desk had staggered halfway to the floor, and completed its fall with a resounding crash as they approached it. The frames of the pictures were worm-eaten, and many of the pictures themselves had dropped to the floor, while others hung by the merest thread of the original means of support.

The detective shuddered involuntarily, and so did the chief; and then they looked into each other's face and smiled.

"What do you expect to discover here, Nick?" asked the chief.

"I should not be surprised to find a mummy; the place seems ancient enough," was the reply.

"One can almost fancy that the old man is standing there demanding that we leave his secrets undiscovered," said the chief. "It is safe to assume that he would kick us out if he could, isn't it?"

"Yes; and it is also a safe proposition that he was an old rascal," replied Nick, grimly. "But come on, chief; we will accomplish nothing by standing here."

They passed on then into the room which Quintus had indicated on the plan as the library, but beyond the general effect of ruin and decay there was nothing here to attract them.

There was a desk in one corner and an old iron safe in another, and pointing toward them, the detective said:

"It is more than likely that we will have to take a look through them before we have finished; but just now my objective point is the secret room beyond the bedroom."

Of the bedroom itself nothing need be said save that it had fallen into decay like the other rooms, and was even more repulsive in aspect.

At the far side of it was the door that had been de-

scribed to them—the door with the iron bar across it, which was padlocked.

Quintus Quexel had said nothing about a key to this lock or to the door itself, and hence Nick concluded that there was none. But among the tools he had brought with him into the wing was a small crowbar, and with this the fastenings of the heavy door were quickly removed.

It was found necessary after that, however, to break open the door, and the detective did not hesitate to do so.

When he had finally made an aperture through which he could insert the bar, he lost no time in prying the door away from the casing.

Intense darkness lay beyond, and an odor, heavy with spices, greeted their nostrils.

Nick instantly produced his flashlight and pressed the button—and then the detectives started back with a mutual exclamation of surprise, with some awe and certainly with utter astonishment.

The room was decorated like the interior of a mausoleum.

It was in every respect a tomb.

The walls were draped in black and purple, which hung in festoons on every side of it; and it was at once noticeable that in this room decay seemed not to have entered, as it had done in the others.

In one corner of the room was erected a shrine. Deep in its recess there was a crucifix of Mexican onyx, and in front of it, on the floor, a kneeling-stool of purple velvet.

On the shelf in front of the crucifix was a brazier of brass from which the oil had long been exhausted, but it was evident that the old grandfather Quexel had kept the flame alive there, as long as he lived.

These things the two men comprehended at a glance; but it was not toward them that their attention was chiefly directed.

There was another object exactly in the center of the room.

A raised dais, ten feet square, covered with purple velvet, supported a pair of plush-covered benches, upon which rested a coffin of most astonishing magnificence, for it was at once evident that it was made of solid silver.

A solid silver coffin, inlaid with gold and studded with a thousand gems which flashed and winked at them, giving back with interest the rays shed upon them by the light which Nick Carter held in his hand.

The detectives stepped forward quickly, but softly, and mounted the dais beside the wonderful coffin; and if they had started with surprise upon first beholding the contents of the room, they gasped with astonishment and wonder when they observed what the casket contained.

It was covered from end to end with heavy plate glass, and beneath the glass, so thoroughly embalmed and so perfectly preserved that the semblance of life was appalling, was the body of a marvelously beautiful woman.

She had not been laid out as corpses usually are, on the back, with crossed hands and an attitude which of itself suggests death; on the contrary, this body was partly on its side. One hand rested under the sleeper's face; the other was carelessly placed upon the pillow, as if it had fallen there quite naturally, and it held between the fingers a brilliant red rose which looked as if it had just been plucked.

The interior of the casket, which was unusually wide and long, had been made to represent a couch, and as the two men looked upon the extraordinary sight before them, it seemed as if the occupant of the coffin had just thrown herself upon the cushions and had fallen asleep there.

"No wonder the old man ordered the rooms sealed," muttered the chief. "Did you ever see so beautiful a woman in life, Nick?"

"No; I never did."

"Did you know that a body could be so perfectly preserved?"

"Chief," said the detective, "I do not think this is a corpse. It is only the representation of one."

"What do you mean?"

"I think the figure is a perfect reproduction in wax. See. If you will look closer, you will discover that I am right."

"Yes, Nick, I think you are right. But what in the world could the old man have wanted of such a thing, do you suppose?"

"I cannot answer that. That is what we are here to find out. One thing is certain, chief, and that is that we have found the key to the mystery of the curse of the Quexels. It is here in this silver casket. The mystery is developing, chief. We will soon know all about it."

CHAPTER X.

THE SECRETS OF AN OLD SAFE.

There was absolutely nothing more inside that strange tomb of a waxen figure than that which has already been described.

The plush-draped walls, the plush-carpeted floor, the shrine, the dais, and the silver-and-gold casket, with its contents, completed the inventory.

The room itself was spotlessly clean. Even dust had not penetrated there, for when the door was closed the place was in effect hermetically sealed.

There was no plate affixed to the casket, no inscription of any kind anywhere in the remarkable room.

"What do you make of it all, chief?" asked the detective.

"A dead love," replied the chief, laconically.

"She was Spanish, or Mexican," said Nick.

"Undoubtedly."

"And that takes us back to our original idea that the curse became operative because of some event which occurred while old Grandfather Quexel was in Mexico during its war with the United States."

"Sure."

"Shall we close this room again, for the present, and tackle the old library? I fancy we will discover the answers to the questions we should ask, in there."

"Yes. Can you open that safe?"

"I think so. It is an old-fashioned one, with a key. We can easily blow it open, if it cannot be entered in any other way."

They returned to the library, closing the door of the improvised tomb after them as effectually as it could be done, for it will be remembered that they were obliged to break it open in the first place in order to gain admittance to the room.

Nick went directly to the safe, while the chief gave his attention to the French desk; but in a moment Nick exclaimed:

"The safe is locked, but the key is on the top of it."

"Possibly the old man tried to get into it, to destroy its contents, after he was taken with his last illness," remarked the chief.

"That is exactly what he did do," said Nick, "for here is a card of old-fashioned matches on the top of the safe beside the key. He must have come in here after he was too ill to more than crawl to the spot, and he brought these matches along for the purpose of burning the papers which the safe contains. He had not sufficient strength to turn the lock. He could not open the safe, and——"

"And so he didn't succeed in his undertaking."

"No."

The chief left the French desk and crossed the room to Nick.

"I am too much interested in what you are doing to work at something else by myself," he said. "We will do the whole thing together instead of separating."

"Yes, chief, that will be better."

A moment later he added:

"I don't wonder that the old man could not turn this key, if it was as difficult a proceeding when he essayed it as it is now. There!"

The [illegible] open.

The interior of the safe was divided into three compartments—a wide one in the center, extending from top to bottom, with a narrower one on either side, that on the right being composed of drawers and that on the left of shelves.

The shelves on the left were laden with letters and papers, documents with seals and ribbons attached to them, and letters without envelopes, for it presently developed that most of them were written during the days when envelopes were almost unknown.

The drawers on the right were none of them filled. They contained small packages of letters, articles carefully wrapped in silk, or cloth, or chamois skin, and some in tissue paper.

The middle compartment contained larger packages, placed one upon another, and each carefully wrapped and tied with tape. There were four of these.

"The packages first," said Nick; and he tore away the wrappings of the top one.

It was found to contain a beautifully embroidered serapa, such as high-class Mexican women are fond of wearing.

The next package contained a lace shawl of exquisite workmanship and of priceless value.

The third contained a woman's ball dress, with all the appurtenances thereto. It was a gown which must have cost a fabulous sum of money to produce, and it was trimmed with an artistic grouping of pearls, sapphires and opals that were worth a king's ransom.

The fourth and last package of the lot was masculine. It was found to contain a dress uniform of a colonel in the American Army, of the time of the Mexican War. It was almost new, and seemingly had not been worn but once.

"There is a romance written in these articles alone," said Nick, handling them tenderly.

"A romance indeed!" replied the chief. "We are dipping into the past with a vengeance, Nick, in this investigation."

The papers on the shelves to the left were next examined, and were found to be mostly connected with business matters transacted in Mexico. There were deeds to vast properties in the name of Aaron Quexel; there were contracts, bills of sale, concessions, etc., etc.; and it was soon found that the letters with them related to them and not to the contents of the middle compartment of the safe.

There were four drawers on the right, and from the first one Nick removed two small packets wrapped in chamois skin. These were found to contain jewels, bracelets, rings, brooches, pendants, lockets and trinkets set with precious stones.

From the second drawer two more packets were taken. These contained more jewels, a *pince-nez* mounted with diamonds, a pair of very small, soiled kid gloves, a withered *boutonnière* and a gold-framed, ruby-studded miniature, beautifully executed, and which was a perfect likeness of the beautiful young woman represented by the wax figure in the casket, in the improvised sanctuary they had just visited.

On the back, in a delicately feminine and foreign hand, was written: "Mercedes de Corona y Balmecedes."

"We at least know her name," said Nick.

"Yes; and it is almost as pretty as her face. What is in that other drawer, Nick?"

The detective opened the fourth drawer.

There were three packages here.

The first was carefully wrapped in chamois skin and then tied with tape, and when the contents were revealed, the two men stared at each other in astonishment.

It was found to contain a glass stiletto, the hilt of which was exactly like the one with which the bride of Quintus Quexel had been stabbed to death. Moreover, it was broken, exactly as that one had been, only in this case the broken part was present, showing that it had been withdrawn from the wound it had made after the deed was done.

There were stains upon it, too; stains which told only too plainly of the terrible work it had once performed.

"And this thing has been here forty years," said Chief Byrnes.

"Forty!" replied the detective. "Say rather that it has been here sixty-five years."

"Yes, yes. We are dealing now with a tragedy which occurred between sixty and sixty-five years ago—or even seventy, eh?"

Nick laid the stiletto carefully aside and opened the second package.

This was found to contain letters only, and they were addressed to "Señor Don Aaron Quexel, Numero 3, Plazuela de Guardiola, Ciudad de Mejico." The writing was by the same hand as the one which had inscribed the name on the back of the jeweled miniature.

"These we will look over when we are more at leisure," said Nick, dropping them into one of his pockets. "I think they will tell us the story—or at least a part of it."

The third package was wrapped in paper, and it was a book—a diary or journal, in fact, for on the fly leaf was inscribed this sentence:

"The tragedy of one life. Aaron Quexel."

"Take this, will you, chief?" said Nick. "We won't need any more than that, I fancy, to inform us of all we wish to know. And that ends the contents of the safe."

"Shall we try the desk now?" asked the chief.

"Yes; although I don't think we have much need of it now."

Nor did they.

There were many papers there which had reference to the life of Aaron Quexel while he was in Mexico, and which might at some later day afford interesting reading for his grandson, but they found nothing which bore directly upon the affair they were investigating.

"Now," said Nick, "we will find Quintus. It is time that he was brought into this matter, don't you think?" and they made their way forthwith to the library, where he was awaiting them.

"Mr. Quexel," said Nick, "I think we are on the track of the curse. I believe we will lay the ghost. But first, before we discuss it, I wish you would go into the old wing with the chief and see for yourself what we have found there. While you are gone, I will run through these letters and this diary. When you return we will talk."

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORY OF THE CURSE.

As Nick Carter had anticipated when he suggested that the chief should take Quintus Quexel into the old wing, they were gone a long time.

There was much to see there for the young man and much to be explained to him by the ex-chief; moreover, Nick wished to be alone while he read those old letters, and looked into the diary of the strange, old man whose influence had so long survived him.

The chief understood this wish on the part of the detective, and he purposely detained Quexel in the wing as long a time as possible.

And so it was that Nick Carter had time quite thoroughly to digest the information contained in the letters and in the book.

We will not attempt to reproduce here all that the old man related in his diary, or all that the letters contained. It will be sufficient to recite the story of it, just as Nick Carter related it to Quintus Quexel when he returned to the library; and he began the story by asking a question.

"Mr. Quexel," he asked, "did you ever know anything about your great-grandfather?"

"No, sir; save that he was a strange man, a rich man, and a very headstrong man. The memory of him is little more than a tradition."

"Are you aware that there is Mexican blood in your family?"

"No. I was not aware of it."

"Your great-grandmother was a Mexican woman descended from an old Spanish family. She was a Corona, of *conquistadores* ancestry."

"I did not know about that."

"She owned vast properties in Mexico which descended to your grandfather. You will find all the papers relative thereto among the effects in the safe and the desk, in the old wing, so I will not dwell upon that part of the story now, more than to say that these property values have something to do with the curse, although they are, in fact, merely a side issue.

"Your grandfather passed his younger days in Mexico. He was a great deal in the city of Mexico itself, but he was sent to the United States to be educated and to acquire English, which he spoke only indifferently.

"His father and mother both died while he was North, and he decided to remain where he was. He left the settlement of the estate largely in the hands of lawyers in the city of Mexico, drawing merely the income from his estates for his uses here.

"With that income he prospered and quickly acquired another fortune here, and he ultimately paid very little attention to his properties in Mexico.

"When war was declared between the two countries he was drawn into it, was appointed a colonel and ultimately went to the city of Mexico with Taylor.

"He was there when peace was declared, and, although he had a wife in the North, he chose to pose as a single man. He also pretended that he was a Catholic, although, in fact, he was a Protestant, and, as far as I can determine, he was never very greatly troubled by conscientious scruples concerning what he did or what he left undone. I know this is not pleasant for you to hear, but——"

"I wish to hear the truth. I am not responsible for what my grandfather did," interrupted Quexel.

"Certainly not."

"Then, please speak as if you were relating the history of a man for whose memory I have no interest whatever."

"Very good, sir. He pretended that he was a Catholic, and he forgot that he had a wife at home in the North. He met and fell in love with a very beautiful girl. She was also a Corona, her father being a cousin of your great-grandfather.

"Mercedes de Corona y Balmecedes was the acknowledged beauty of the country. She was an heiress to vast wealth. She was beloved by everybody, for her qualities as well as for her matchless beauty; and she returned your grandfather's love.

"They were married in the cathedral at Puebla, eighty miles southeast of Mexico, and went to live at one of the great *haciendas* which formed a part of the properties of your grandfather, in Mexico.

"Mercedes had a brother who was at that time in Paris being educated. He was younger than his sister.

"Less than a year after the marriage of your grandfather to his sister, young Alvarado started on his return home. He came back by way of the United States, and he stopped in New York. While there—to make a long story short—he learned of the perfidy of his sister's husband. He found your grandmother and held several interviews with her.

"When he had collected all the evidence he needed he started for Mexico.

"When he arrived he went directly to the *hacienda* where his sister, as the wife of your grandfather, was living.

"He found them together, seated under the trees in front of their palatial home, and, without preamble or preface, he denounced the man for what he was.

"This story is told in detail in these documents I have here, but this is the substance of it, and you can read it over carefully at your leisure.

"Your grandfather tried to stop the flow of denunciation cast upon him by Alvarado, but he could not; neither could he deny the truth of the statements made by the young man, for Mercedes' brother had brought incontestable proofs with him to support all he had to say.

"During the scene which followed, Mercedes rose and went into the house, but after a moment she returned and she remained there near them, standing at one side until she was entirely convinced of the absolute truth of the accusations against the man she had supposed to be her husband.

"Then, quite suddenly, and doubtless before either of them could prevent her from acting, she stabbed herself through the heart with this"—Nick exhibited the broken glass stiletto he had found in the safe—"and fell dead at their feet.

"When she fell, your grandfather drew a pistol and shot Alvarado, killing him instantly, so that what had a few moments earlier been a scene of pastoral happiness was now transformed into a tragedy.

"This diary tells me that the noise of the quarrel, or the sound of the pistol, was not heard beyond the environment of the little glade where it occurred.

"Your grandfather, realizing that his life would not be worth a moment's purchase if the facts were made known, carried the two bodies into the house, which was built of huge blocks of stone, and soon after the conquest.

"He carried the bodies to a room in that house, which was never used. He closed the shutters, and with his own hands he filled the windows with masonry. According to the account here he made a tomb of it.

"Then he went away.

"Somehow, he reached the coast at Acapulco. He was

searched for in the other direction, toward Vera Cruz, but he succeeded in making his escape.

"Ultimately he reached Paris.

"It was at a time when the art of manufacturing wax figures was a great fad in France; and your grandfather sought out the most expert of this class of artisans, and from him procured the extraordinary wax figure you have just seen. It was made with only this miniature as a guide for the artist to follow.

"Ultimately your grandfather brought it here and installed it where we have found it, and until the day of his death he worshiped at that shrine.

"But if he escaped from Mexico and ultimately returned to this house, he did not avoid pursuit.

"There is a letter here, written by a Balmecedes named Antonio, who was a maternal uncle to Mercedes, in which he states that the Quexel family is doomed. I will read you the closing paragraph, for it is written in Spanish. I will translate as I read. It says:

"'It has been decided, in a council of the family, that you shall not be harmed personally, but that no descendant of yours shall survive you. Your children may live to die natural deaths, but whosoever among them shall marry shall lose his bride by the glass stiletto, as Mercedes was killed. No issue shall ever come to a child of yours, or from a child of yours. So, live on, accursed. So, die accursed. Walk in the open if you will—in the broad light of the day. You will suffer no bodily harm. But the brides of your sons shall die as Mercedes died, and your daughters, if you have any, shall die as she died, before they can bear descendants of yours.'"

Nick Carter ceased reading for a moment.

"There is the curse," he said. "There is the whole story in a nutshell. I cannot explain to you how your mother escaped, save on the presumption that there was no Balmecedes at hand to murder her before you were born; but that the curse is active and has passed from your father to you—from your mother to your bride—is already an established fact.

"The Corsican vendetta cannot be more relentless than this affair. It has already covered a period of sixty years and seven brides have been slain. That, Mr. Quexel, is the awful story."

Quexel remained silent for a moment after that. Then he raised his head and asked:

"Will it lead us to the murderers of my wife, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes, it will. I will find them for you, Quintus Quexel," was the calm reply.

CHAPTER XII.

A BEGGAR WHO SAW THINGS.

It was not until the following morning that the detective began active operations in the matter of actually tracing down the murderer of Janice Quexel, and then he went about it in rather an unusual manner.

He believed, to begin with, that there was little or no doubt that the name of the murderer was Balmecedes, and that he was a descendant, or a collateral relative, of the Antonio Balmecedes who wrote the threatening letter to the grandfather of Quintus Quexel.

First, then, he examined a city directory.

He found several Balmecedes there located in widely different parts of the city, and he believed that it would only be time wasted for him to investigate all of them; so he sought out the Mexican consul general, on lower Broadway.

There he represented himself as a lawyer who was anxious to obtain some specific information relative to the descendants of Antonio Balmecedes, who was prominent in the political affairs in the city of Mexico during the forties, and he finally succeeded in persuading the consul's clerk to telegraph to the Mexican capital for information on the point.

"I wish merely to know if there are any descendants of Gen. Antonio Balmecedes in the United States at the present time," he said, "and, if so, in what part of the country they may be found, and I will gladly pay whatever is required for the information."

When, during the course of the afternoon that followed, he received a reply, it was as follows:

"Two grandsons of Gen. Antonio Balmecedes, named respectively Antonio and Manuel, are supposed to be in the city of New York. Their address is unknown."

That was all; but such as it was, it was very much to the point.

"It will be a strange thing if I cannot find them now," he mused, "although I must lose no time, for it is certain that they will not remain long in the city, now that their work is done. I think I will begin where I always have begun in the past, at the starting point, which in this case is at the foot of West Twenty-third Street, at the time of the murder."

He lost no time in getting there, and presently he

found himself standing upon the very spot where the murderer must have placed his feet when he escaped from the yacht after the commission of the crime.

And he stood there, thinking. He immersed himself in what he called a brown study. His head was bent forward so that his chin almost rested on his breast, and he was oblivious to all his surroundings when he felt the touch of a hand against his arm.

"Maybe, sir, you would be so kind as to help a poor cripple," said a plaintive voice behind him; and he turned to behold a beggar who had haunted that locality for years—a professional beggar who so perfectly simulated a cripple that he easily deceived the multitude of people who passed the spot.

"Here is a man," thought the detective, "who was here on this wharf when that bridal party landed. He would never have missed such an opportunity as that."

Then he wheeled suddenly and faced the beggar.

"My man," he said, "I know you. You are no more a cripple than I am. You have hung around this place for years, and it is high time you were sent over to the island for a rest."

The fellow turned and was about to shuffle away when the detective recalled him with a sharp word.

"None of that!" he said. "Stay where you are until you hear me out. I am an officer, but I'll let you go this time if you can answer a few questions I want to ask you."

"I'll answer 'em if I can, if it ain't givin' anybody away," replied the man, sulkily.

"Oh, it isn't giving anybody away. Were you here when a bridal party landed at this pier in a private yacht the day before yesterday?"

"Do you mean the one where the woman was killed?"

"Yes."

"Sure I was here."

"Well, what I want you to do is to begin at the beginning—that is, at the moment you first saw the yacht—and tell me everything, every incident and every motion that you saw, from that time until I tell you to stop. Do you understand that?"

"I think I do, sir."

"If your memory proves to be good enough so it is worth it, you will receive a five-dollar bill when you get through; but that depends on the excellence of your memory."

"Maybe, sir, if you were to ask me some questions——"

"You could make up lies to fill them out to beat the band. I know that only too well, Mr. Beggar. No. I want you to tell your own story in your own way. I may question you about some parts of it, but for the most part of it, it must be your own tale. And just bear this in mind, too: if I catch you lying, you not only will not get the five, but you will get thirty days on the island. So now begin."

"I'll do my level best, sir."

"See that you do."

"Well, sir, the yacht comes in. I knows she is comin' before I sees her, for I reads the papers and keeps posted about things that is going on—see? She comes in. I sees her afore she touches the wharf and I am right here waiting for her—see?"

Nick made no remark, and the beggar bent his head and knit his brows. After a moment he asked:

"You said you wanted me to tell everything I saw?"

"Yes. Everything."

"No matter what, or how simple it seemed?"

"If you saw a rat run out from beneath one bale here and disappear under another one, I want you to tell me about it."

"Exactly. Now I understand."

"Fire away, then."

"Well, sir, she comes in here, right alongside of the pier. The men get out a gangplank that is all covered with red carpet and trimmed with flowers. The captain he takes off his hat and wipes his forehead with his handkerchief, and I notice that it ain't very clean for such an occasion. I wonder if he knows it or if he is too much excited to know that he has pulled the wrong one out of his pocket.

"I see a lot of people on the deck. They all get up and everybody in the push begins to talk at the same time, and it seems almost as if they said the same things, too.

"The bunch is clustering around one very pretty woman, and I thinks that she is the new wife.

"Then, down here at the gangway, the captain, he comes ashore and walks up and down on the wharf for a minute or two. Then he goes back to the deck of the yacht.

"Then a tugboat pulls into the slip on the other side of the yacht. I see one of the women in the party around the bride on the deck lose her handkerchief overboard, but she only laughs, and I thinks that she says it's no matter, and to let it go.

"Then a steamboat on the other side of the pier blows a whistle, and all the women in the bunch jump and scream. Then they laugh. Then I sees that they are having an argument about something, and after a minute I see the bride go aft and disappear into the cabin."

"Do you see anything at all forward all this time?" asked Nick.

"Yes. The crew is forward, looking on at the scene. The stewards are there, too, and two or three girls who look like ladies' maids or such. And there are two stokers, with their faces as black as ink, and I wonders if my friend is one of them."

"What's that?" asked Nick; but if the beggar heard the question he did not heed it.

"Then I sees the captain walk up to the group of guests and say something, and I can hear the women answer something about a letter, but I don't know what it is.

"I sort of miss the bride from the party, for she is the prettiest one in the bunch.

"After a little another pretty girl starts after her. The others shout to her as she goes, and she laughs back at them just as she enters the cabin; but she ain't inside more than two seconds when out she comes again on the jump, screaming like mad."

"Be particular, now, and omit nothing," said Nick, sternly. "You have done very well so far, and now I want you to remember both ends of the yacht and the dock as well."

"All right. When the lady comes out screaming the whole push rushes aft toward the cabin. They try to crowd through the door all together. Then I notices a chap what I hadn't seen before, and I thinks he must have been standing out of sight behind the others.

"He seems to have come from somewhere forward. He rushes toward the cabin with the others, but when he gets almost there he turns and runs toward the gang plank.

"Two or three men on the pier have heard the commotion, and have started up the gang plank, so that he meets them halfway; and I hear him say:

"'Where is the nearest telephone? I must send for a doctor at once.'

"Somebody tells him, and he starts on a run; but just as he reaches the foot of the gang plank he runs plump into me, for I am there, and I says to him, says I: 'Petie, where are you goin'?'

"'Damn you!' says he; and he lets out a flipper which catches me in the jaw, and I hunt grass. When I pulls mieself together and gets up, he has disappeared.

"Then——"

"That will do," said the detective. "I'll ask a few questions now. You have earned your five-spot, and here it is; and now, my man, if you are as wise as I think you are, you can pick up ten more of those things just like finding them."

"Then, Mr. Cop—for you are a cop, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Then it is the fellow I called Petie that you're after, eh?"

"Yes, he is the chap I am after."

"Ain't it worth more than fifty to me, if I can put you onto getting him?"

"Yes. It will be worth considerably more than fifty. A good deal more than fifty if you can do it and do do it. And it will be more than your life is worth if you try to fool me."

"Oh, I won't try that. I know better."

"Tell me what you know about that man who knocked you down."

"Why, I just simply plain, ordinary knows that he is the cul what done the killing."

"How do you know it?"

"'Cos I've got two eyes, a pair of ears and a little horse sense. My profession makes me spend my life in studying folks. I knows what a man's motives are before I can very plainly see the man or hear his voice. When I makes a touch I can tell you beforehand whether I'll get a sliver or not, and purty close to how big a one it will be at that.

"I didn't know that there had been any murdering done when that cove clipped me side of the jaw, or I'd have stopped him somehow. What I thought was that he was a sneak thief who had smuggled himself aboard and had lifted some of the jewels of the party, and was hunting cover while the women folks were screaming; and when I calls him Petie, and makes for to stop him, it was to insinuate that these here preserves are mine and that he might just pay ferriage while he was going ashore—see?"

"Yes, I see."

"And then he hands me the punch, and moseys."

"Well, what then? You said that he disappeared."

"So he did; but I knows where he went to."

"Ah! you know that?"

"I knows where he ought to have gone, anyhow. You see, it's this way: About two weeks ago I makes friends with one of the stokers aboard that craft, while she was lying here for purty much all day. He said his name was Joe—something—I forget what; but he was a furriner, all right, at that. He was loaded to the scuppers with money, too, and he used it for treats like a man. You see, he wanted me to find him a good place to board where it was sorter under cover, for he said he had a brother who looked like him who was just coming out of prison.

"Well, I finds the place for him and takes him there, and he takes the place; and after that I don't see my friend the stoker ag'in; but when I runs in to Petie, on the gang plank, and Petie tips me one on the wagger, I sees the resemblance, and I says to myself, says I: 'That there is the long-lost convict brother as sure as I am the Duke of Benkackiac.' I knows it ain't the stoker, 'cos the stoker has a cast in one eye, and I knows it is the brother because of the resemblance; and now, Mr. Cop, if you wants to go to the place, just foller me."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END OF THE STORY.

"What sort of a nest is it where you are taking me?" asked Nick, as he started away with the beggar, keeping just a little behind him in the meantime.

"It's two rooms at the top of a house I knows about, where there is an easy way to git out through the roof, and two or three other ways of making yourself scarce if things gets too warm. I don't suppose it is likely that they'll be there now, either of them, for the stoker, I reckon, is up the river with the yacht, and this cove is probably engaged in pickin' up loose change along the avenue."

"He wasn't dressed like a stoker when he made his escape from the yacht, eh?" asked the detective.

"Nope. He looked like one of the guests. That was his game, you see. He was going for a doctor. I hope you're a doctor as well as a cop, mister, for maybe I'll need one if he sees me tipping you off about him."

"I'll take care of you. You need not worry."

"All right."

The beggar led the way to Tenth Avenue, and thence uptown for several blocks.

Presently he turned into an alley between two houses. "It's in the rear of those buildings," he said, "and three doors further up; but I thought we'd better go in through the roof. We can do the surprise act a good deal better in that way, and we can get onto the roof through this house, or—to be plain—through the house where I lives myself. You see, boss, I'm trying to make a friend of you, 'cos I don't want to be pulled off of my stand. It's a sinecure. One of my pals offered me a hundred for it the other day. Here we are. And say, do you want me to go with you and see the thing out to the end?"

"Yes. I don't want to lose sight of you."

"'Fraid I'll play double?"

"I don't wish to put temptation in your way, and, besides, if you earn the money I want you where I can give it to you."

"Sure thing; and say, if it comes to a scrap, you'll find I ain't no bloomin' cripple at that."

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"I'll lead the way; you just foller."

They climbed three flights of stairs, and then a short ladder to the roof of the building. Thence, the beggar led the way silently across the roofs to the scuttle of the third house from them, which he opened with a key.

"Same key fits the hull row," he explained. "More'n one cop has wondered how a cove has given him the slip so dead easy here. Come on."

They descended a short ladder after the beggar had touched his fingers to his lips to suggest silence, and, after a moment, they stood together in a half-darkened hallway before a door made of heavy planking.

The beggar pointed toward the door, but he still kept the fingers of his other hand against his lips, and then Nick was surprised to see him take a piece of strong rope from one of his pockets and deliberately loop it around the knob of another door. This done, he made the remaining end of the rope fast to the balustrade.

"They might take it into their heads to go out that way," he whispered to the detective, placing his lips very close to Nick's ear in order to do so. "It is one of the ways of getting out of this place. Now, if you'll just stand right there I'll give a signal which will make them open the door if there is anybody inside; and when they open it—well, you're boss then, I reckon."

Nick took the position suggested, and then the beggar stepped to the door and rapped loudly upon it.

There was no answer, and he turned and winked at Nick; then he rapped again, but in a totally different manner.

Again there was silence, and again the beggar winked his eye, after which, as before, he rapped a third time and in a different way from either of the other summonses; and he concluded the rap by uttering a long, low whistle.

Instantly there was an answering sound from the other side of the door—a faint scratching noise, as if some one were dragging the point of a pin across the panel of the door; and this the beggar answered by making the same noise with his thumb nail.

This seemed to complete the signals, for Nick heard a key turn in the lock, followed by the rattling of a chain and the noise of a shooting bolt.

Then the door swung open just enough to permit the detective to see the half of a man's body standing in the way of entrance.

But in that one glance Nick Carter saw enough to convince him that he was in the right place, for the man had the dark and swarthy countenance of a Mexican, and, moreover, he had the cocked eye which the beggar had described as belonging to the man who had acted as stoker aboard the yacht.

And also at that first glance, Nick could see beyond the man in the door—that is, over his head—that there was another swarthy-countenanced man inside the room.

He had already decided how to act when the door was open, and he did not hesitate to carry out his purpose.

The instant the man appeared in the doorway Nick Carter leaped forward and struck out with his right fist full at the fellow's face.

The blow landed where the detective meant it should, and the man staggered backward into the room, dragging the door open with him and, falling in a heap in the middle of the floor.

He uttered a cry in Spanish as he fell, and there was an answering cry from the opposite side of the room as Nick bounded across the threshold and entered.

As he did so there was the flash of a revolver almost in his face, and a bullet whizzed past his ear so close that it burned him.

Then something else flashed in the air, and Nick instantly realized that it was a knife which the second man in the room was in the very act of throwing.

He saw it leave the assassin's hand, and he leaped aside, so that it just grazed his coat beneath his arm; and then he took his second leap forward and grappled with the man who had thrown it.

As he seized the murderer—for it was the real murderer he had tackled, as events proved—they turned, and the detective saw in the quick glance he cast around the room that the beggar was down, evidently seriously wounded, and that the man he had struck down as he entered the room had risen to his feet and was approaching the combatants, knife in hand, ready to strike.

With a quick turn he lifted his antagonist from his feet and raised him in the air.

Then, with all his mighty strength, he hurled him bodily through the air against the other assassin, who was approaching them.

The two men went to the floor together with groans and curses, and instantly the detective was upon them, and two well-directed blows from the butt of his revolver convinced them of the wisdom of lying quiet.

To place the handcuffs upon them was then the work of a moment; and that done, the detective turned at once toward the beggar.

"I reckon it's all U. P. with me, Mr. Cop," he gasped, smiling faintly. "That sticker the fellow chucked at you found me and I'm a goner this time. It won't make any difference only to a little girl I've got up in Harlem. She thinks that I'm a broker. I showed you my room in the third house from here, when we came past it, and if you'll get my trunk out of there you'll find all about me inside of it. And if you'll see that the little kid gets the money I've saved up, and follow the directions you'll find in that trunk, I'll go on the long journey sort of easy. I reckon you're on the square. Will you tell me your name?"

"I'm Nick Carter."

"Are you? Then it's all right. I know you'll do what I ask without waiting for you to say yes, and you'll find everything, my name and all in the trunk and——"

And that was all. He was nearer death than he believed he was.

And thus we end this story.

* * * * * * *

Nick Carter attended to all of the wishes of the beggar, as contained in a letter found in the trunk, and he had the satisfaction of informing Quintus Quexel that he believed the curse on the family was removed at last.

THE END.

The next number of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, 449, will be entitled "The Curse of the Quexels; or, The Ghost of a Murdered Beauty."

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